



JEEVADHARA

INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANITIES IN THE POST-DENOMINATIONAL AGE

Edited by

Felix Wilfred

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Indigenous Christianities In the Post-Denominational Age

Edited by:
Felix Wilfred

Malloossery P. O.,
Kottayam - 686 041
Kerala, India

Tel: (91) (481) 2392530, 2397017

Mob: 9495519775

E-mail: jcmanalel@gmail.com

Web: www.jeevadhara.org

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Editorial

Churches cannot be reproduced and replicated. The local Churches are often mistakenly thought to be divisions of one large universal Church. This danger is less when we speak of indigenous Churches. Here the agency of the believers of a particular nation, region, and locality with their history, tradition, culture and challenges stands in the foreground. The “indigenous” refers to the independence and freedom the Churches enjoy as they are not dependent for their life and direction from external factors and forces. History of missions shows that the attempt to reproduce Churches without attending to the socio-political, cultural conditions of the people have led to protests against missionaries and to the formation of indigenous Churches. Thus we have many indigenously initiated churches in Africa, Asia and in other parts of the world.

These indigenous Christianities from the soil almost invariably tend to give prime of place to *experience* which can be viewed as a defining characteristics of them. This stands in contrast to the denominational Churches which focus on doctrines and distinguish one from the other on the basis of doctrinal differences. Further, the indigenous Churches are not Churches which result from a process of inculturation of an imported Western form of Christianity. Far from borrowing elements from neighbouring religions and cultures, what indigenous Christianities do is to negotiate their experience and expressions with the experience and expressions of the religious traditions of the locality. As a result, what happens is not a borrowing from other religions, but rather a process of osmosis and interweaving of many elements which create new forms and configurations of Christianity making them indigenous in every way. The features we have highlighted tell us also why we need to consider the indigenous Christianities as post-denominational.

We are studying in this issue Indigenous Christianities or Churches not from a strictly theological or ecclesiological concern, nor from the perspective of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Indigenous Christianities are viewed as a sociological and anthropological phenomenon, but which have many theological implications. This aspect of our approach justifies why this theme finds a place in the first number of *Jeevadhara* which is devoted to "Social Concerns".

Arthur Jeyakumar gives us a historical background of indigenous Christianities in India expounding three case studies. John Baptist from a Biblical perspective shows how the Pauline Churches emerged as indigenous by responding to the questions and issues of their contexts. The very doctrinal treatments of Paul were occasioned actually by the problems and challenges encountered by the indigenous Churches. Paul Joshua argues for the need of a different methodology to the study of indigenous Churches, and it cannot be the same we use to approach denominational or historical Churches. Rowena Robinson goes into the indigenous Indian Christianities from an anthropological perspective and highlights certain characteristics that mark them off from the mainline Christianity. Gnana Patrick inquires whether in some Hindu revival movements or social movements we could see resonances of Christianity. He finds this to be the case, and shows this by expounding two instances from history. Finally, in my contribution I try to look at the indigenous Christianities from a global perspective and see the nature of their political involvement which is marked by ambivalence.

The contributions making up this issue are results of a National Conference I organized at the Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, Chennai, in February 2014. I wish to thank all the contributors for taking time to finalize the manuscripts for publication in *Jeevadhara*. My sincere thanks go to Josephine for her assistance in organizing the conference. With her singular dedication and thoroughness, Nirmal supported me at every stage in editing the manuscripts which I appreciate, and I thank her very warmly. I thank Michi for her contribution in creating the intellectual environment at the Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies for the preparation of this volume.

The issue of indigenous Christianities is at its infant stage as regards study and research. I hope this volume will prove helpful to the readers to trigger their reflections, and stimulate scholars to research and go deep into this less researched terrain of indigenous Christianities.

Felix Wilfred

Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies

Chennai

Historical Background to Indigenous Christianities

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Introduction

Historical Background to Indigenous Christianities

D. Arthur Jeyakumar

The author is Professor, History of Christianity, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College. In this article, indigenous Christianities refer to the expression of Christian faith based on local culture. It also stood for nationalism and anti-denominationalism, and so against western paternalism. This paper deals with three such efforts of the 19th century: 1) The Hindu Church of Lord Jesus/ Nattu Sabai (Naive Church) of Mookuperi, Tamilnadu started by one Sattampillai among his own Shanar / Nadar Christians, following quite a bit of Jewish /Old Testament practices and Indian / Tamil customs. 2) Dr. Parani Andy's the National Church of Madras /India, a non-denominational lay movement. 3) The Christo Samaj by Kali Charan Banerji and Joy G. Shome which emphasised lay participation and non-denominationalism. But unfortunately except the Nattu Sabai the others ceased to exist due to various reasons. Yet their attempts need to be commended.

Introduction

Indigenous refers to rootedness in the culture of the people. It is in contrast to that which is from outside or imported or foreign. When we talk about Indigenous Christianity or Christian expressions in India, we imply the cultural rootedness as well as selfhood of the native Church. The Indian – expressions of Christianity have their own structure and cultural expressions in contrast to Western / 'missionary' Christianity. In fact, Christianity from its inception has been crossing the boundaries of culture, and one of its best examples is in the **Book of Acts 15**, the decision at the Jerusalem Council, which affirmed the validity of non-Jewish culture.

The Indigenous Movements we are going to look at in this article are diverse; yet they have one underlining factor, viz. Making Christianity rooted in local soil/culture. Though the attempts to express Christianity in local or Indian systems vary, starting from the Madurai Jesuit Mission of the 16th century, we will for practical reasons stick to only three examples from the 19th century, viz. The Nattu Sabai / The Hindu Church of Lord Jesus, the National Church of India (Madras) and the Christo Samaj.

The Hindu Church of Lord Jesus

The earliest attempt for an indigenous Christianity was made among the Christians of Tirunelveli as early as 1857. It is known commonly in Tamil as 'Nattu Sabai' (Native Church) though it is known also as the Hindu Church of Lord Jesus (the word Hindu was in reference to the country India, rather than the religion) or Yega Ratchagar Church of Mukuperi – Prakasapuram.

The Instrument

The Nattu Sabai, the name I prefer for practical reasons, was established by one Arumainayagam, a native of Mukuperi village according to M. Thomas Thangaraj.¹ He was born on 24th October 1823 at Nazareth² and died on 16th January 1919. His father was Vedanayagam Nadar and his mother's name was Thangam. Apart from Tamil and English he was well versed in Greek and Hebrew. It is said that he knew eighteen languages³. Because of his acumen, A. F. Caemmerer of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) Mission's Nazareth district, appointed him as a teacher in the school at Nazareth. So he came to be addressed as Sattampillai (meaning Teacher / Monitor). Soon he was chosen to undergo catechist training at the S. P. G. Seminary founded by G. U. Pope in Sawyerpuram where he topped the list of candidates in 1848. In 1850 he was sent to Chennai

¹ M. Thomas Thangaraj, "The History and Teachings of the Hindu Christian Community Commonly called Nattu Sabai in Tirunelveli" *Indian Church History Review*, vol.5, No.1, (June 1971): 46.

² *Golden Jubilee Souvenir* of Mukuperi – Prakasapuram Indiya Yega Ratchagar Sabai's Church – building dedication (Tamil), 4.

³ P. G. Paul, *Mukuperi – Prakasapuram Indian Church of the Only Saviour Centenary Souvenir* (Nazareth, 1958):18 (Tamil).

where he stayed for six years, learning different languages, History of Christianity and Christian doctrines. He came back to his native place in 1857 and very soon he broke away from the SPG Mission.

Causes for the Establishment of Nattu Sabai

Patriotism was one of the main reasons for Sattampillai to initiate his own Church in the year 1857 as we all know is an important year in the history of India's national movement. It is said that Sattampillai took the native feeling against the British rule as a lever and employed it in the Church. It was the time when the local SPG missionary A. F. Caemmerer was acting very tough with Sattampillai over certain personal as well as mission related issues. When Arumainayagam's marriage was arranged with a particular girl, Caemmerer objected to that. When Sattampillai stood-up against the missionary, he was dismissed for insubordination. The unsympathetic, paternalistic, authoritarian stand of Caemmerer, the missionary, added fuel to his strong native feelings. Since there were quite a few sympathisers, Sattampillai was able to start his own church at Mukuperi in 1857.

Another reason was the publication of the book **Tinnevelly Shanars** written by Robert Caldwell, an SPG missionary stationed at Edeyenkoody of the SPG Tinnevelly Mission. This was published in 1849 in England and it created much agitation among the local Shanars. The very expression "Shanars" was found offensive and derogatory to a people who liked rather to be called respectfully as Nadars or Nattars. The Christians at Mukuperi were all Shanars / Nadars, and so reacted vehemently against the view of Caldwell as well as against the haughtiness of the Western / European missionaries. As a result they sided with Sattampillai who was one of them. So we can say that caste feeling played a major role in the formation of this particular indigenous Church. To this we should also add the ritualism of the SPG missionaries.

Very soon the Nattu Sabai had a strength of about 2500 Christians drawn from nine villages in total of five-mile radius.⁴ The Nattu Sabai members who were entirely of Nadar caste, considered becoming Christian as an opportunity for empowerment. In such a situation, the

⁴ M. Thomas Thangaraj, *Op.cit.*48.

attempts made by SPG to win back the members of the Nattu Sabai failed and so it was given up. By 1880, the SPG Mission found out that the Mukuperi group was growing.

Teachings of the Nattu Sabai

During its early stages, the Hindu Christian Community had nothing heretical in its doctrines and teachings. Sattampillai criticized Western Christianity and so wished to dispense with it. As a result, he incorporated in his Nattu Sabai Jewish and native Indian practices and observances. He instructed his people to observe Sabbath, and so came to have worship on Saturdays, instead of Sundays. Very soon he began to teach his followers to observe / follow Old Testament / Jewish practices except circumcision and animal sacrifice. The following are their doctrinal positions even now⁵, which are found in their **Book of Catechism**:

The Nattu Sabai believes in one God who is revealed in the Old Testament as Yahweh and who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The word 'Yahweh' is used in many of their books and also in their worship. The first page of their book contains the words: 'Yahweh Thunai' meaning 'by the mercy of Yahweh'.

It acknowledges Jesus Christ as the unique and final revelation of God and as the only means of salvation for every human being. Their Church is named as 'Yega Ratchagar Church' meaning 'Church of the only Saviour'. Many in the Nattu Sabai consider the Holy Spirit as a 'Power' and not as a person, and so the Nattu Sabai Community has no definite stand on the question of the Trinity.

The Nattu Sabai has a Congregational understanding regarding 'Ministry'. That idea developed as a reaction to the ecclesiastical authority of the SPG. Though in the beginning the Community considered Arumainayagam as 'all in all' and addressed him as 'Rabbi', later it began to select its own ministers, who are not 'ordained' as such. The ministers have the exclusive right of administering the sacraments. It has another Order called 'Preachers' who are chosen by the congregation to assist the pastors (ministers) in the preaching ministry.

⁵ The section on the doctrinal positions of the Nattu Sabai is from M. Thomas Thangaraj, 54-61.

The Nattu Sabai has two sacraments, namely, the Lord's Supper and baptism.⁶ The Community believes in adult (above 18 years of age) baptism by immersion. Baptism is viewed as the counterpart of circumcision. The catechumen has to undergo a period of preparation for about one week. The Lord's Supper is mainly viewed as the counterpart of the Passover, and it is celebrated once a year on the Passover Day, viz. 14th of Abib. It is held only at the Central Church at Mukuperi. Seventh to fourteenth of Abib is observed as a period of reparation through prayer and meditation. Only the Chief Pastor of the Church is eligible to celebrate the Lord's Supper'.

Practices

The Nattu Sabai observes Sabbath as per the Jewish custom. It follows the Jewish calendar and celebrates all the Jewish festivals⁷. Rules of purification are observed. Ritual impurities attributed to women (Leviticus 12) are followed. Sattampillai introduced some Indian customs too, such as prostration, use of frankincense, squatting on the floor, praising God with folded hands and entering the Church without foot-wear.⁸

The Nattu Sabai worship is a strange combination of Jewish and Christian worship. An hour before the service, trumpet is sounded. No bells are used. The congregation uses in its worship only the Book of psalms rendered in the Tamil poetic style by Sattampillai and set to South Indian Karnatic ragas. These were published under the Hebrew title 'Tehillim'. Singing during the worship service in pure South Indian classical tunes is a special feature of Nattu Sabai's worship.

I. The National Church of India (NCI)

The second example for indigenous Christianity is again taken from the former Madras Presidency, but quite different from the first one narrated in the preceding pages. This attempt for indigenous expression

M. Thomas Thangaraj, 58-60.

The Jewish Festivals observed are New Moon Festival, Festival of the Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of the Tabernacles, Passover Feast and Days of Unleavened bread, Day of Pentecost. P. G. Paul, *Centenary Souvenir*, 21-23.

Y. Vincent Kumaradoss, "Hindu – Christian Church" (Nattu Sabai), in *The Oxford encyclopedia of South Asian Christianity*, Roger E. Hedlund, ed. vol. 1, 305-307

was made by a person named Dr. S. Parani Andy / S. Pulney Andy, who wished to delink Christianity from its western denominational roots.

The Proponent

Dr. S. Parani Andy was born in Trichinopoly in 1831 when his high caste parents were temporarily staying there. He had his medical education in the Madras Medical College and completed it with credit. He served in the Subordinate Medical Department for some years. After resigning his job, he went to England in 1859 for higher studies, and qualified to become a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons.⁹ He was the first Indian student to register for a British medical degree.¹⁰ He accepted Christianity while in England but did not undergo baptism. He joined Freemasonry¹¹ there and remained a freemason till the end. While in England, he was influenced by Liberal Theology. His aim in establishing the NCI was to solve the problem of Christian disunity in India by gathering all Indian Christians into one self-supporting and self-governing Church and which would have the New Testament as the sole guide in matters of faith and doctrine.¹²

Parani Andy returned from England to Madras in 1861. The Madras Government appointed him as Superintendent of Vaccination. When His Highness' Government of Travancore asked for his services, he was lent by the Madras government. On 3rd may 1863 he took baptism at the hands of Rev. J. Fritz of the Basel Evangelical Mission in Calicut.¹³ But he did not join any denomination. After serving the

⁹ Dr. S. Pulney Andy, "Eminent Native Christians", in *Christian Patriot* (August 27-September 3, 1891) *A Collection of Papers*, 1-8.

¹⁰ Kaj Baago, "The First Independence Movement among Indian Christians", in *Indian Church History Review*, vol. 1, no.1, (June 1967):71; cf. Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, (Madras: CLS, 1969)

¹¹ Freemasonry refers to the teachings and practices of the secret fraternal order of Free and Accepted Masons, an international secret society practicing brotherliness, charity, mutual aid and obedience to the law of the land. Members must be adult male and believe in a Supreme Being and in the immortality of the soul. It is not a Christian institution. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 4, (Micropaedia): 966.

¹² D. Arthur Jeyakumar, "Parani Andi (Pulney Andy)" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of South Asian Christianity* vol. 2., 532-533.

¹³ *Christian Patriot* mentions Calicut as the place Parani Andy took baptism; D. Arthur Jeyakumar basing Kaj Baago's *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity* mentions in his article on "Parani Andi", Mangalore as the place of baptism.

Government for many years, he returned to Madras where he spent the rest of his life.

On 28th November 1885, he presented his plan to a group of lay people, consisting mostly of students and government officials, and after a period of discussion and consideration the NCI (Madras) was formed on 12th September 1886¹⁴. According to Y. Vincent Kumaradoss, by and large, it remained an upper-caste Christians' movement.¹⁵

Scheme ¹⁶

The following were presented on 28th November 1885 to a group of people who came to his residence:

Designation

National Church of India: - Non-Sectarian in principle – Or the United Church of Christ Christianity being of Asiatic origin, the unreasonableness on the part of Indians adhering to the different sectarianisms, the products of political dissensions or revolutions of Europe.

Thanks to the generosity of the people of Europe for planting and maintaining Missions for the spread of the Gospel in India, as well as in other parts of the world. The efforts to be made for the self-supporting system by the establishment of an indigenous Church and thereby relieving the people of Europe from further burden.

The Constitution of the Church

Members may be enlisted from the several denominations now in existence without insisting on their severance with their former place of worship.

Members will be at liberty to commune, to have baptism performed and marriage celebrated in any church they prefer.

¹⁴ S. Pulney Andy, "Memo" in *A Collection of Papers*, 17-20.

¹⁵ Y. Vincent Kumaradoss, "National Church of India / National Church of Madras" in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of South Asian Christianity*, vol.2., 472-473

¹⁶ Appendix, "Scheme", in *A Collection of Papers*, 29-30.

The hours of divine service will be so arranged as not to interfere with the attendance of parties at their original Church.

Ministration

Ministers may be taken from any of the now existing churches, if they agree to confirm to our principles i.e., purely non-sectarian in nature and practice. – Or., Individuals of good education, of virtuous and pious disposition may be selected, trained and ordained without compelling them to give up their connection with other respectable vocations on which they depend for their livelihood. At present the labours of the preachers should be honorary. When funds permit, they may be allowed a certain sum for each Service, Baptism, Marriage and Burial. They will be at liberty to employ their time in educational, scientific and other respectable or useful pursuits.

Religious Toleration and Tenets

Should be based on cosmopolitan principles, adopting or recognising the New Testament as the only code or canon for guidance (i.e., for Christian Doctrines).

Church Government

The Government of the Church will be conducted by a Council elected and appointed by the Congregation. In addition to the matters affecting the welfare of the Church, the Council will also be permitted to act as a Court of Arbitration, if the members choose to avail themselves of its decision, to take action for representing the grievances of the Community and to obtain redress for the same.

The Path of NCI

The aim of NCI was to gather all Indian Christians into one self-supporting and self-governing church dispensing with Western denominations, Western creed or confession. In the early stages, NCI did not administer any sacraments and did not have any ordained clergy. Very little is known about the activity of NCI except that it had regular worship services on Sundays with messages / homilies and singing of Tamil lyrics, an uncommon one at that time.

He wished NCI to be indigenous. In a lecture titled "Are not Hindus Christians?"¹⁷ he tried to compare Christianity and Hinduism and the similarities found in them.¹⁸ Though it was a superficial study as per Kaj Baago, yet it indicates the change that had taken place among Indian Christians especially of high caste background with regard to Hinduism. Parani Andy tried to impress upon the NCI community that Christ is of Asian origin. In an article in *Eastern Star*, a periodical which he edited and published, he wrote, Christ is an Asiatic to the very backbone and it is folly to say that he is a foreigner and his teachings are foreign and unsuited... He is very agreeable to the sons and daughters of all clime and especially to those of Asia. The churches as they exist at the present day are hostile to India. India needs a Church of her own – a national one which has no arbitrary creeds and forms but acts upon the principle 'walk in the light of the Gospel and give the life of Christ'...¹⁹ Though the NCI had a few hundred members, it declined after the death of the founder in 1909 and by 1920s faded away without a trace. It failed mainly because of lack of support from Indian Christians and western missionaries. In fact, he sent an Appeal to the heads of all missionary Societies in Europe and America for their support. This was in 1893 and it had the signature of 146 persons.²⁰ And yet the NCI did not find favour. So it ceased to exist.

II. Calcutta Christo Samaj

The Background

To trace the origin of Christo Samaj, we have to go back to the attempt made by Lal Behari Day in the 1850s. He was an ordained pastor under the Scottish Mission of Bengal. He was against the exclusive missionary control of the Indian Church and advocated equal status for ordained Indian ministers with the Western missionaries. Also, he asked for membership of such in the Scottish Church Council

¹⁷ The lecture was given on 22nd March 1888 at the Madras Native Christian Literature Society cf. Kaj Baago.

¹⁸ Kaj Baago "The First Independence movement...." 75-76.

¹⁹ Extract from *Eastern Star* in *A Collection of Papers*, 64. The exact issue date of *Eastern Star* is not mentioned.

²⁰ "An Appeal to the Board of Directors of Foreign Missions in Europe and America", *A Collection of Papers*, 243-251.

which comprised of Scots only. However, the suggestions / proposals of Lal Behari Day were nipped in the bud itself by Alexander Duff.²¹

Then Lal Behari Day brought forward a proposal for a 'National Church of Bengal' comprising of all Christians including Orthodox and Roman Catholic which would have the Apostolic Creed only as its Confession of faith and which would have a much freer pattern of worship and ministry. Of course, this too was dismissed by the missionaries as unacceptable.²²

But the desire of Bengali Christians to have their own organisation could not be suppressed, and in 1868 a number of educated Bengali Christians formed 'The Bengal Christian Association for the Promotion of Christian Truth and Godliness, and the Protection of the Rights of Indian Christians'.²³ This Association was very critical of Western missionary domination and paternalism. Its first President was Krishna Mohun Banerjea who was an ordained clergy of the Anglican Church in Calcutta.

Kali Charan Banerjea

One of the leaders of the radicals was Kali Charan Banerjea who was born in 1845 in a Bengali Kulin Brahmin family. In c. 1858 he entered Alexander Duff's College. 'Under the influence of the teaching here but mainly because of a fellow student, he became Christian in 1864'.²⁴ In 1870 he along with a few others started a news journal The Bengal Christian Herald, later named The Indian Christian Herald. A statement in the very first issue read: "In having become Christians, we have not ceased to be Hindus. We are Hindu Christians, as thoroughly Hindus as Christian. We have embraced Christianity, but we have not discarded our nationality. We are as intensely national as any of our brethren of the native press can be".²⁵ Through the said

²¹ G. Macpherson, *Lal Behari Day, Convert, Pastor, Professor*, 70 cited by Kaj Baago, "The First Independence Movement Among Indian Christians", *Indian Church History Review*, vol.1., (June 1967): 66.

²² Ibid

²³ *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (1871): 261, *ibid.*, 66

²⁴ B. R. Barber, *Kali Charan Banerjea, Brahmin, Christian, Saint*, *ibid.*, 67

²⁵ *Church Missionary Intelligencer* (1871): 261, *ibid.*, 67

news paper K. C. Banerjea expressed in no uncertain terms that he and his friends want independence for the Church in Bengal. He argued for Hindu customs to be retained in or modified for use in Christian worship.

In 1877 K. C. Banerjea and J. G. Shome organized the Bengali Christian Conference, a forum to unite Bengali Christians of all denominations, to make them more Christian Indians and to have indigenous forms of worship.²⁶ At the Second Decennial All India Missionary Conference held in Calcutta in 1882, Shome presented a plan for an independent Indian Church with voluntary pastors. But as usual, the response of the missionaries was negative citing the reason that the Church in India was not yet self-supportive. As a result, they decided to form the Calcutta Christo Samaj.

Calcutta Christo Samaj

In 1887 K. C. Banerjea and Joy G. Shome were becoming impatient with the attitude and response of the Western missionaries to their proposals and initiatives. They left their Churches and formed the Calcutta Christo Samaj, a Christian parallel to the Brahmo Samaj. Its purpose was 'the propagation of Christian truth and promotion of Christian union, and it was to gather all Indian Christians within it, thereby eliminating the denominations'. Its confession was the Apostolic Creed only, which in the minds of the organizers provided the broadest basis possible. The members met weekly in a private home, mostly in K. C. Banerjea's for common worship led by members in turn both men and women. They celebrated the communion in some form.²⁷ The Samaj always emphasised indigenization. Kaj Baago comments that "it is impossible to establish to what extent indigenous forms found their way into the preaching and worship of the Christo Samaj...".²⁸ K. C. Banerjea tried to carry on the attempt made by Krishna Mohun Banerjea in formulating an indigenous 'Vedic Christian Theology' through his articles in the Indian Christian Herald, but it did not succeed.

²⁶ B. R. Barber, *Kali Charan Banerjea*, 68.

²⁷ Kaj Baago, "The First Independence Movement...", 69; also Sunil M. Caleb "Banerjea, Kali Charan", in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of South Asian Christianity*, vol.1, 57.

²⁸ Ibid., 70

Sad to say, that the Calcutta Christo Samaj did not survive long and was dissolved in 1894, after seven years of existence. K. C. Banerjea who died in 1907 was one of the founding members of the National Missionary Society in 1905 which had / has as its purpose to carry on the work of evangelization in India with Indian money and Indian personnel, both men and women.

Conclusion

We have seen in the preceding pages the attempts made by Indian Christians to indigenize Christianity. Basically they all were against western missionary domination / paternalism. The timing of such efforts were such that we can assume the influence of Indian national feeling expressed in diverse ways especially after 1857, and so we can probably say that they were expressions of Indian nationalism. Unfortunately the NCI (Madras) and the Calcutta Christo Samaj did not last long. Only the Nattu Sabai is in existence now and it may be because of the caste affiliation.

The failure of the NCI (Madras) and the Calcutta Christo Samaj need to be analysed. They failed because of lack of support from Indian / local Christians and also because of opposition from the Western missionaries. The financial influence of the Western Missions over a large section of the Indian Christian Community and the dependence of Indian Christians on the missions for jobs etc. were also cause for failure. It is significant to note that the members of both the Samaj and the NCI came from educated, financially independent and caste groups. That also could be another reason for their failure.

Yet they were an influence infusing the spirit of ecumenism not only in the 'mission fields' of Asia and Africa but also among the Western mission societies, and so they (the NCI and the Samaj) are of historical significance.

Professor, History of Christianity
Gurukul Lutheran Theological College
Chennai- 600010
arthurjeyakumar@hotmail.com

Indigenous Church: A Pauline Response

A. John Baptist

The author is a Biblical scholar with a Masters Degree from the Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome, and a Ph.D. from the University of Madras. Presently he is the rector of St Francis Seminary, Veppoor, Tamilnadu. Presuming that the early Pauline churches were indigenous churches, this article, in the first part, tries to study the characteristics of Pauline churches: The Church of God; The House Church; The Body of Christ; Charismatic Community, ministry and authority of women. The second part of this article tries to argue that the Pauline theology of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord was evolved in a situation of particular content of the individual churches. It is hoped that the insights one gets out of this article would help in building up the concept of indigenous church.

Introduction

From a cursory reading on the topic in the internet I came across a definition to indigenous church as, “a community of believers birthed in a *specific context* who are Spirit-driven (Spirit-led and Spirit-empowered) to accomplish God’s purposes for and through that community. Like the various churches described in the New Testament, particularly in Acts, these local and national communities of faith are to be Spirit-governed, Spirit-supported and Spirit-propagated.”¹ So I proceed with the pre-understanding that

¹ DeLonnRance, Defining Terms and Principles of Indigenous Church Philosophy: Toward a Renewed Surrender to a Spirit-Driven Missiology and Praxis, A Paper Presented to The Missions Leaders Forum of World Assemblies of God Fellowship Congress, (Chennai: 6th February 2011): 10.

1. The Bible reveals that God has always dealt with people in terms of their cultural context.
2. The principles and values of the indigenous church emerge from a biblical theology of missions.

Since most of the literature point to the early church as narrated in Acts as indigenous church, I would like to study the Pauline literature and evolve some characteristics of Pauline churches, presuming that they are indigenous churches and secondly try to argue that the Pauline theology was evolved according to the particular context, need, issues and problematic of each church. To prove this I have attempted to study the Christology of Paul especially his explanation on the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Pauline Letters

Why to take Pauline letters for study on indigenous churches? Because, Paul is the mirror through which we are presented the idea about Jesus. Moreover, his letters, even before the gospels, were the first faith documents of the early church. Through his actions and writings Paul taught his Gospel, namely, Gentile converts need not be circumcised as the Law of Moses required for Jewish people. Further, Christians need not meet in the Synagogue but could form their own associations and use their own buildings. The whole range of fight and difference of opinions of Paul with Jerusalem church and the pillar apostles were to safeguard the indigenous character of the gentile Antiochan, Galatian and other churches against the imposition of ideas that were claimed to have come from Jewish Jerusalem Church. The entire letter to Galatians is a witness to it. So, in a way Paul can be called the pioneer of the indigenous churches in the biblical times.²

² As we begin to study the Pauline literature, some cautions are proper. Basically, it must be kept in mind that Paul is not a systematic theologian in modern sense of the term. He is basically a preacher and a pastor who was concerned about establishing and organizing the churches. So we cannot expect a well-defined and clearly articulated ecclesiology or Christology from Paul. Cf. Antony John Baptist, *Unsung Melodies from Margins*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2014): 151. Secondly, Paul's social world and the church were small in nature, which were composed of individuals and households of diverse ethnic backgrounds, religious traditions, and social status. They were very small units within a social context shaped by powerful political and economic interests.

The Social Setting of Paul's Ministry

With the ministry of Paul, there was a social shift in the early church from being a predominantly Palestinian and rural movement to being a Gentile and urban movement. Cities had much greater potential for the Pauline mission than villages: "Cities were much more open. They possessed both power and potential for change. They would have within them more independently minded people who were open to the new message of the gospel of Jesus Christ."³

The Characteristics of Pauline Churches as Indigenous Churches

Paul's discussions on the church in his letters indirectly bring out some characteristics of the early church as he visualized it. These characteristics can function as pointers for evolving our own indigenous churches.

Church of God

Paul's usage of the term "the church of God" intends "to depict the little assemblies of Christian believers as equally manifestations of and in direct continuity with 'the assembly of Yahweh', 'the assembly of Israel'."⁴ But at times Paul speaks of "the assemblies (plural) of God", while LXX uses almost always singular. Dunn explains it saying, "Paul evidently had no problem with conceiving 'the assembly of God' as manifested in many different places at the same time – the churches (of God) in Judea, in Galatia, in Asia, or in Macedonia. Each gathering of those baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus was 'the assembly of God' in that place. ... The point is that wherever believers met for fellowship and worship they were in direct continuity with the assembly

In our complex world and circumstances of today, the condition of Paul's times cannot be replicated. Rather, his dealing with the indigenous churches can be source of inspiration giving us some guidance and direction. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998): 672-673.

³ D.J. Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches", in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1993): 884.

⁴ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 537; also Cf. P. T. O'Brien, "Church", in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1993): 538.

of Israel, they were the assembly of God.”⁵ As corollary Dunn states that “Paul’s conception of the church is typically of the church in a particular place or region. He does not seem to have thought of ‘the church’ as something worldwide or universal – ‘the Church’.”⁶ Therefore the words ‘the church of God’ in (1Cor 10:32) which reads as “Do not become an offence, whether to Jews or Greeks or to the Church of God.” can be explained as referring to church in Corinth. Therefore we can safely conclude that “Paul’s primary thought was of the local assembly as ‘the church of God’ in the city where it met.”⁷

The House Church

In the Pauline letters, the term *ekklesia* can also mean as referring to “a gathering that met in a particular home, a house-church.”⁸ P. T. O’Brien further explains it saying, “On occasion, a whole congregation in one city might be small enough to meet in the home of one of its members.”⁹ The dictionary of Paul further explicates this saying, “Households were not the private residences of today but were most likely to be large houses which provided shops at the front and living accommodations at the rear. There would also have been room for workshops and living quarters for dependents and visitors. Such an arrangement would have ideally suited Paul’s purpose in that it enabled him to finance his mission through his work as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3; 20:34, 35; 1Thess 2:9) and provided him with a ready-made platform from which preaching and teaching could be conducted daily among the many who would have been around the workshop.”¹⁰ Households,

⁵ Ibid., 540

⁶ Ibid.. Today we have to take into consideration also the historical development that has taken place after Paul. In this connection it is interesting to note that Pope Francis often refers himself as ‘bishop of Rome’.

⁷ Ibid., 541; also cf. 1Cor 1:1; 16:19; 14:23. But in the latter writings of Paul, say Col 1:18 and 24, the church was referred with universal reference. One more corollary of this way of thinking is that the words ‘church’ or ‘assembly’ for Paul do not mean church as assembly meeting ‘in church’ or ‘in building’ but “He thought rather of Christians coming together to be church, as church.” (Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 542 emphasis added).

⁸ P. T. O’Brien, “Church” 125.

⁹ Ibid.. Cf Col 4:15; Philem 2; Acts 16:5, 15, 40; Rom 16:23; 1Cor 14:23; 16:19

¹⁰ D. J. Tidball, “Social Setting of Mission Churches”, 884.

in the social realm, were consisting of principle families, slaves, friends, tenants, partners or clients in commercial or agricultural enterprise. The indigenous church grows making use of the locally available sources or resources, thus self-supporting.

The body of Christ (Cf. Rom 12; 1Cor 12; Eph 4)

This imagery of body that Paul uses to explain the nature of the church brings out the mind of Paul. He does not speak uniformly or stereotypically of the 'body of Christ'.¹¹ Apart from the usual messages that the body of Christ communicate,¹² in 1Cor 12 Paul draws our attention to what he calls as 'weak members'. According to him, they are indispensable (1Cor 12:22), to be clothed with greater honour (1Cor 12:23), treated with greater respect (1Cor 12:23). This is another special quality of the indigenous church of Paul's time. Paul was also concerned about the weak believers (Cf. 1Cor 8:9, 11) in matters of food offered to the idols. In order not to cause of their falling he prefers not to eat meat (Cf. 1Cor 8:13). He also speaks in favour of the 'late comers' – the poor (Cf. 1Cor 11:21-22) – when the rich humiliated them by going ahead with their own meal without waiting for the other brothers to arrive. The collection of money that made for the Jerusalem church is the concrete sign of his love for the weaker section of the church. Therefore the concern for the poor and the marginalized within the church is another hallmark of the Pauline indigenous church.

The indigenous church as charismatic community (Rom 12:6-8; 1Cor 12:4-27; Eph 4:7-16)

This idea is closely associated with the idea of body of Christ. The early church, as today's church, was filled with the charismatic gifts. This concept of charismatic gifts is entirely new and the special contribution of Paul. The gifts and charisms are given graciously.

¹¹ Cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 548-552.

¹² 1. No member of body should try to be another member (foot-hand, ear-eye). Each has its function and role in the body (12:15-20). Thus feelings of envy and superiority are to be avoided. 2. All the members are important and needed for the function of the body. The suffering and the honour for one member of body is suffering or honour for the whole body (12:21-26).

Therefore it is a gracious act of God. With his or her gifts the individual should contribute to the whole church. Thus the whole body becomes 'charismatic' (Cf. Rom 12:4-8). When speaking of the gifts (Cf. Rom 12:6-8; 1Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; Eph 4:11; also cf. 1Cor 12: 4-6), Paul says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1Cor 12:7) and "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ," (Eph 4:12). So, the early indigenous church was a vibrant church where each one used the God given gifts for the good of the saints and the building up of the church.

The Ministry and Authority of women

The discussion on the characteristic features of the early church, the indigenous church, will not be complete without the discussion on the ministry and authority of women in the early church. We are aware of the controversial texts¹³ in Pauline literature that need a detailed study by themselves. Here I only make some mention of the positive contribution of Paul's literature in this regard. Dunn is right when he says, "the fact of ministry (of women) is clear, but the issue of authority is more obscure."¹⁴ As for as the ministry of women is concerned, they played a very prominent role. Rom 16 gives a list of women co-operators with Paul like Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:3-5), Andronicus and Junia (Rom 16:7),¹⁵ Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis (Rom 16:6, 12), who are known for hard work.

Pauline Interpretation of Christ Event according to the Social Setting of Indigenous Churches

This second section of the article is about the role of social factors in the formation of faith in the early church. D. J. Tidball discussing the social setting of mission churches says, "The churches founded by Paul were not abstract theological entities formed in a social vacuum but real life communities of men and women who inhabited particular social settings. The term social setting is a general one which includes matters of the social context of the churches; the social class of

¹³ Cf. 1Cor 11:2-16; 14:33b-36; 1Tim 2:12-14.

¹⁴ Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 586.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 587, no. 114. Junia is a female name. She is acclaimed as prominent among the apostles. Dunn even thinks that "the question can hardly be ignored whether they were actually the apostles (founders) of at least some of the Roman churches.

converts; the dynamics involved in the formation and development of the Christian communities; social aspects of Paul's own ministry; and social factors in the formation of early Christian doctrine, usually known as the sociology of knowledge."¹⁶

Therefore, the mission churches of Paul took root and shape in a particular social milieu. So also his theology and teaching were, as said in the beginning, responses to the concrete situation or problems of the particular churches. So D.J. Tidball is right when he says, "Paul's theology is in fact a secondary reaction to 'primary, concrete phenomenon in the social world.'"¹⁷

I would like to show in the following section how the Pauline theology of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of our Lord was evolved in a particular context of the church. In doing this I also want to argue that Christian theology should evolve from a particular context of the church responding to its situation and problems. Then both the church and its theology will be truly indigenous.

Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus in Pauline Literature

The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus were interpreted in the Pauline letters in various ways.¹⁸ The following section will explain how these events were explained to the churches as response to the particular context or problem.

1. *The Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:23-29)* *in the Context of Economic Divide*

Paul narrates the event of Lord's Supper, popularly known as 'Last Supper', in the context of tension between rich (those who had their

¹⁶ D. J. Tidball, "Social Setting of Mission Churches", 883.

¹⁷ Ibid., 890

¹⁸ As expiation for sins past and present (Rom 3:25); as coming under the law (Gal 4:4); as sacrifice for sins (Cf. Rom 3:25; 5:6, 8; 8:3; 14:9; 1 Cor 5:7; 8:11; 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14, 15, 21; Gal 2:21; 1 Thess 5:10; also Cf. Lev 4; 16:11-19); as the death of the beloved son (Rom 5:10; 8:3, 32; Gal 2:20; 4:4-5 also Cf. Mk 12:1-9 pars; Gen 22:1-19); as curse of the law (Cf. Gal 3:13 also cf. Deut 21:23); as redemption, buying or buy from/ back: Cf. Rom 3:24; 1 Cor 6:18, 20; 7:21-23; Gal 3:13; 4:5); as giving up (Cf. Rom 4:25; 8:32; Gal 1:4; 2:20).

own houses cf. v. 22) and poor (who had nothing v.22) Christians. According to 1Cor the poor were humiliated (v.22) when they came to the 'Lord's supper'. The rich were concerned about 'their own supper' (v.21). So "one goes hungry and another becomes drunk." (1Cor 11:21).

To contrast this he reminds them of what he had received and what he handed over to them, the right teaching on the institution of Lord's Supper (cf. 1Cor 11:23-25). Lord's Supper which he received is in contrast to the way they were 'celebrating' it. The true Lord's Supper signifies the following: 1. Self-giving or sharing (1Cor 10:14-22); 2. Jesus dying for the weak (1Cor 11:26; 8:11); 3. Political and religious liberation (Ex 7-12); 4. New Covenant which unites God with people and people among themselves (1Cor 11:25; also cf. Ex 24:6-8).

The earliest record about the Eucharist therefore had come to us in the context of social setting of rich and the poor, in order to teach the right understanding of Eucharist. So Paul is not just repeating the tradition that he received but fits it beautifully into the context of his church. So the Eucharistic theology gets highlighted in the context of the social problem of the Corinthian indigenous church. Though his base is on the handed down tradition, he draws inspirational conclusions to the concrete problem of his time and church.

2. The Death of Jesus as Reconciliation (2Cor 5: 18-20)

This idea of death of Jesus as reconciliation was introduced only in Pauline letters especially in 2Cor 5:14-6:2. According to Paul, God reconciled the people to Himself through Christ. There he explains the role of the death of Jesus in the following way "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2Cor 5:19). He further says, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2Cor 5:21)."

What is important here is the context in which the whole discussion on reconciliation takes place. It is the context of a rift between Paul and the Corinthians.¹⁹ After the 1Cor letter reached the Corinthian

¹⁹ Cf. R. E. Brown, *Introduction to New Testament* (New York: Doubleday 1997): 541-544; Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, vol.8 Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999): 5-6.

indigenous church, Timothy would have visited Corinth. He might have reported to Paul the bad situation of the Corinthian church caused by the intruders. Then Paul would have made what is called the *painful visit* (cf. 2Cor 2:1). During this visit someone would have offended him in public (2Cor 2:5-11; 7:12). After returning to Ephesus he wrote a letter “out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears (2Cor 2:3-4)”. This is called as ‘*The Letter of Anguish*’ or ‘second lost letter’. In the meantime Titus brought the news of willingness of the Corinthians for reconciliation (2Cor 7:5-13, 15). As immediate response Paul wrote this letter from Macedonia to express his readiness for reconciliation.

So after explaining the theology of reconciliation, Paul goes further to say, “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (5:20). This appeal in the context of rift with the Corinthian community would also mean “Be reconciled to/ with me”.²⁰ So the indigenous context of seeking for reconciliation between Paul and Corinthians brought out the Christological explanation of the death of Jesus Christ as an act of reconciliation.²¹

3. Resurrection of Jesus as Guarantee of our Resurrection (1Cor 15)²²

Paul devotes one full long chapter to speak of resurrection. There are two things involved here: the resurrection of Jesus and that of the believers. Unlike the above two instances, here the teaching on the resurrection of Jesus is used as a guarantee for the resurrection of the dead.²³ Some Corinthian Christians would have claimed that there is no resurrection of the dead (15:12). Paul is trying to correct such an opinion.²⁴

²⁰ The words of Paul in 2Cor 6:11-13 and 7:2-3 make a better sense in this background. Cf. J. B. Green, “Death of Christ”, 204.

²¹ For Paul’s discussion of death of Jesus as reconciliation also cf. 1Timothy 2:5-6; Rom 5:10-11; Col 1:20; Eph 2: 14-16 – here the Law appears as a barrier separating Jew and Gentile; there the death of Christ abolishes this ‘dividing wall’.

²² Also cf. 1Cor 6:14.

²³ Jan Lambrecht, *Collected Studies: On Pauline Literature and on The Book of Revelation*, Analecta Biblical series 147, (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2001): 72.

²⁴ Cf. Ibid., Chapters 8, and 9. Therefore we should not expect any philosophical

Jan Lambrecht explains further the situation prevalent in Corinth and the need to discuss the theme of resurrection of the dead.

The Christian community of Corinth was not that large, may be between 200 and 300 members. It was composed of a majority of simple people (cf. 1Cor 1, 26; not many were wise and powerful or of noble birth). They were surrounded by a society which to a certain extent and perhaps more often in the upper classes can be characterized as materialist, if not immoral. Belief in a future bodily resurrection goes counter to what everybody in town daily sees and experiences: death, burial, definitive separation from friends, disappearance of loved ones. Belief in a resurrection of the body is not seldom ridiculed by referring to the decomposition of the corpses. Several data in 1Cor 15 appear to confirm that a radical denial of the bodily resurrection by some Christians is in view.²⁵

Against such a background, "He (Paul) simply asserts the resurrection as a fact (presumably believed by them) and seeks to draw out its implications for their life and faith."²⁶ In this passage (1Cor 15) Paul shows the indissoluble link between the resurrection of the dead and the resurrection of Jesus which has already happened (cf. 1Cor 15:13, 16). So here the theology comes in handy to answer an active problem of the church.

Conclusion

This article is an attempt to explain Indigenous church or churches from Pauline perspective. After some preliminary remarks on definition and Pauline literature I have pointed out some salient characteristics

discussion as to whether and how such a thing is possible (Cf. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*): 239. Rather try to understand how the resurrection of Jesus explains or proves the resurrection of the believer.

²⁵ Ibid., 76.

²⁶ L. J. Kreitzer, "Resurrection", in Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 806. Also cf. Hieronymus Cruz, *Christological Motives and Motivated Actions in Pauline Paraenesis*, European University Studies Series, no. 23, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990): 98-99.

of Pauline churches which are indigenous churches. First of all by 'assembly of God' Paul refers to any local assembly that met for fellowship and worship. Secondly, these churches in the time of Paul grew in households, making use of the structures that were available to them. Thirdly, in the image of the body of Christ special attention is called to Paul's concern for the weak members or weak believers. These churches were charismatic communities giving proper space for women to exercise their ministry.

The second section of this article attempts to prove the role social setting played in the evolving of the theology or dogmas. This is proved by explaining how the theology of the Last Supper, death and resurrection of Our Lord took shape in the particular context and the concrete problems the churches were facing. The theology of Last Supper is studied in the context of economic divide in the Corinthian church; the death of Jesus is explained as reconciliation in the background of rift between the Corinthian church and Paul himself; and finally the teaching on the resurrection of Jesus is narrated as guarantee of the resurrection of the dead.

Therefore, finally, we can say that the churches to be true to the Biblical roots, should evolve its theologies, beliefs and doctrines from its own soil, that is, in its indigenous context.

St. Francis Xavier Seminary
 Veppoor, Vellore
ajbaptist@gmail.com

Methodologies for the Study of Indigenous Christianity

Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj

The author serves as a Professor of Theology at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS), Bangalore, India. He has researched and published extensively on indigenous churches. The diversity and complexity of expressions of the Christian faith in the world today are both noteworthy and at the same time perhaps confound the observer. Any attempt to study them therefore presents a number of challenges to the researcher. This article seeks to suggest a way forward for those interested in analysing such movements. It observes that diversity and complexity notwithstanding, indigenous Christian expressions need to be studied for they provide a unique window into the way it provides, among other things, mechanisms at meaning making in the lives of its votaries. It then goes on to suggest that a critical-interdisciplinary approach that employs a variety of scholarly disciplines, which allow for the analysis of human experience just as it allows for an analysis of its theological and historical determinants, is a valuable and mature way to both understand and appreciate forms of indigenous Christianities.

Two Vignettes

It is a regular Friday in Dhakka, Bangladesh. Sometime around noon a small *Jama'at*, or fellowship, of *Īsā imandars*, 'ones faithful to Jesus' gather in a small hall for worship and *milad-e-Īsāe*, or prayers to Jesus. As small the congregation arrives at a small room, copies of the *Kitab ul Mugadesh* (a Bengali translation of the Bible) and an

indigenously produced collection of *Īsāe*, songs are handed to them. They sit themselves on the floor and place their *Kitab*'s on decorated bookstands. The meeting begins with enthusiastic singing of *baul gan* or folk songs followed by reading of the scriptures and reciting them from memory. The *Zabur* or Book of Psalms is a favourite just as the Epistles are. The leader normally reflects on the passages read aloud and encourages his flock to devout living in a predominantly Islamic context. Their model is Jesus, who they affirm was a 'Muslim' ('Muslim' here means one who surrenders to God), and so they follow in his footsteps. Yet they clarify that they are Muslims not of the kind committed to *Allah* based on the prophet Muhammad's teaching, but are those who are submitted to *Allah* through the person and because of the work of *Īsā*. As *Īsā imandars* they are followers of Jesus Christ, the son of God, they assert. They are people who do not merely practice the rituals of submission and holiness but by virtue of being part of the body of Christ they acknowledge they are positionally as well as practically holy people.

Two days later on a Sunday morning in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India, thousands of people from across the region arrive on foot, by tractor, bus and truck to *Yesu Mandir* (Temple of Jesus) the site of *Yesu Darbar* (Court of Jesus), held at the sports field of the Allahabad Agricultural Institute (now a deemed University). Well equipped with food and other necessities for their long journey they come with their children, relatives and neighbours in tow. As is clearly evident the vast majority hail from non-Christian backgrounds, and are predominantly poor yet they constitute the new breed of *Yesu bhaktas* (Jesus Devotees) emerging in south Asia. As they arrive they seat themselves on the floor under a make-shift shelter and wait expectantly. At about half past eight the service begins with a voluminous congregational cry that rents the air: *Yesu Masih ki Jai* (Hail Jesus)! For the next four hours or so this crowd of thousands sit with rapt attention singing about and hearing the gospel of *Yesu Masih*. Oppressed particularly by poverty and by the battle between malevolent spiritual forces they are at *Yesu Darbar* to learn of and experience the power that *Yesu Masih* offers. Indeed during a prescribed time in the course of the service people flock to the stage to share with the others how the

peace, healing and dynamic that *Yesu Masih* provides has transformed their lives. Invigorated by and learning from that experience, they are challenged to be channels of that good news and power to their people as they return home.

These two vignettes of the many shapes of commitment to Jesus Christ that exist in south Asia display for us some of the colourful variety of Christianity that exists here. These and many other forms of indigenous Christianity invite close observation and detailed study. Three reasons seem appropriate. One, they are relatively less known and even if known they are often treated as cults and therefore bracketed out of reckoning. Second, they appear to be increasing rapidly and therefore stand out as significant for the church and religious life in the region. Third, because of their unique approaches to expressing their faith they represent creative efforts of rooting it in the soil of south Asia, rather different from many more well-known attempts of yesteryears.

Clarifying Nomenclature

Before we proceed with such an exploration we need to ask: what do we mean by 'indigenous Christianity'? According to dictionaries the term 'indigenous' refers to that which naturally exists in a place or country rather than arriving from elsewhere. Strictly speaking, therefore, Christianity can be indigenous only to Palestine. That is where its origins lie. That is where it was born out of its Jewish matrix. Does talk of indigenous Christianity therefore imply strict adherence to the Jewish form of the faith that was practiced by the first disciples? But that this Jewish template does not represent the plumb line for all forms of indigenous Christianity is a philosophy and practice we find enjoined in the scriptures itself. Does indigenous then refer to the churches established in ancient times by the apostles and their immediate descendants? Undoubtedly as Christianity moved east, early on in its life, it established its long standing presence in Asia, much before the propagation of the faith by Southern and Western European agents.¹ In as much as it can be employed could they be the rightful claimants to the term indigenous? That longevity alone represents the criteria will be challenged by some other movements that have, though with

¹ See the discussion for e.g. in T.V. Philip *East of the Euphrates: Early Christianity in Asia* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998)

more recent origins in India, nonetheless created a home for themselves by virtue of their deep engagement with the religion and culture of the region. So apparently there is the danger of actually losing the distinctiveness of the term. This is an on-going dialogue and one that perhaps cannot be conclusively solved here and now. For our purposes we will employ that term, though with a measure of qualification/caution. Here the expression 'Indian' Indigenous Christianities will be employed. This descriptor provides the needed qualification. It points to those churches/movements which originate in India and possess a peculiar Indian character and shape. Whatever the name and shape they take, it is assumed that they represent a unique blossoming of the seed of the gospel that was sown in Indian soil now bearing Indian flowers and fruits.

Studying Indigenous Christianity

Now the question as to the manner in which one may study these movements/churches requires attention. While a measure of continuity with established Christianity is visible, there is however a measure of discontinuity as well. As a result, one cannot assume that both are identical in every way. Three reasons may be mentioned why such study will need to adopt a methodology suitable to its subject: First, their distinctive approach to spirituality; second their socio-political context; and third their engagement with their host cultures. Studies of indigenous Christianity will need to respect this polydimensional character. A suitable way forward therefore may be to adopt a polymethodic approach, proposed by Ninian Smart.² Since one cannot arrive at a mature understanding based on, for example, textual study of doctrines alone, perhaps the conventional approach to the study of major world religions, this polymethodic approach, attending to its wide range of dimensions, seems suitable; for it could accord ground level reality the required weight.

Let us look at the first area by way of example. For the major section of the Christian church, conventional historical and theological

² Ninian Smart, *The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973): 164.

frames seem to exist with which one may analyse and study them. These approaches of course privilege written historical and theological texts, whereas for indigenous Christianity the primary material is their 'experience' of God. Their dynamic resides in the primary and immediate experience of God through the Holy Spirit. Just as studies in Pentecostalism suggest, so also for indigenous Christianity an immediate experience of the Holy Spirit in everyday life represents one of its defining features.³ A noted student of Pentecostalism Harvey Cox expresses this well.

As a theologian I had grown accustomed to studying religious movements by reading what their theologians wrote and trying to grasp their central ideas and most salient doctrines. But I soon found out that with pentecostalism this approach does not help much. As one Pentecostal scholar puts it, in his faith "the experience of God has absolute primacy over dogma and doctrine." ... I think that he is right, and it may well be that the reason for the kind of magical realism imbuing many pentecostal testimonies is the same one that pushes people toward dancing and jumping and praising in strange tongues: the experience is so total it shatters the cognitive packaging.⁴

If experience then lies at the heart of indigenous Christian spirituality any analysis of the movement will necessarily accord it a significant place. But then the question arises: how does one study experience? It appears that few resources exist in the history or theology department for such a pursuit. In order to really make progress it appears that first of all, the habits of living in a "text dominated academy and society where we privilege the word,"⁵ and its corresponding neglect even marginalisation of other equally if not more pertinent material has to be questioned. Second "indigenous knowledge systems"⁶ have to be accorded the recognition its due. As Vasudha Narayanan argued, an

³ That many, though not all, IICs are also of a Pentecostal/Charismatic type should not come as a surprise.

⁴ Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Cassell, 1996): 71.

⁵ Vasudha Narayanan, "Embodied Cosmologies: Sights of Piety, Sites of Power", *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, vol. 17, no. 3. (September 2003): 495-520 & 499.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 495.

‘epistemic pluralism’, that funds the inclusion of “the lived experience, the experiences of space and time through performing arts, art and architecture and food” as significant elements “not just in department of anthropology and school of fine arts” but also in other departments where the study of religion is pursued will be a valuable way forward.⁷ Likewise Harvey Cox, Allan Anderson, Amos Yong and others⁸ have pointed out that, epiphenomenal articulation of the primary experience of the Holy Spirit, or that ‘articulated experience’, could constitute my subject matter. Cox names them ‘primal speech, primal piety and primal hope’,⁹ while Anderson prefers the term ‘spirituality’ to express the ‘lived experience’¹⁰ of the Spirit characterised by ecstatic phenomena.

To further our study of such spirituality we might adopt one of three broad approaches.¹¹ The first is what we may call *Mystical-Experiential* approach. As terminology suggests, focus is on comprehending the essence and shape of religious experience by immersing oneself in it. Engagement with spirituality is not merely ‘academic’, but more profoundly a personal involvement in its understanding. Perception is achieved through participation and comprehension through immersion. The second is the *Theologico-Historical* approach. Here spirituality, particularly of past masters, is

⁷ Ibid., 495. It is instructive to note that a similar approach was suggested by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his acclaimed study *The Interpretation of Cultures* “...if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do” (London: Fontana, 1993): 5.

⁸ Also see the studies by Stephan Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* [JPTS vol.5] (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), and Daniel Albrecht, *Rites in the Spirit: A Ritual Approach to Pentecostal/Charismatic Spirituality* [JPTS vol. 17], (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999)

⁹ Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping Of Religion in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994): 82

¹⁰ See Allan Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 195-205

¹¹ A caveat is necessary here. I do not assume that this taxonomy is meant to offer a watertight schema that is both exhaustive and comprehensive. There will doubtless be features that may not fit neatly into this pattern and some overlap maybe recognised. As a descriptive categorisation this suggestion seems to be as good as any other.

studied from within a religious tradition so as to delineate their practice and its underlying theology in order to discover how they shaped tradition. A third approach is the *Critical-Interdisciplinary* approach. Here spirituality is situated within a broad human framework. Spiritual thoughts, rituals and practices are seen as acts of human beings within society, constrained and shaped by its myriad forces and in turn shaping society and culture. Spirituality is considered sociologically pertinent and its influence on society significant, just as it is in terms of other cognate critical disciplines. It is this recognition that prompts Philip Sheldrake to observe the three-fold consensus seems to exist. "First, spirituality is both multidisciplinary and an interdisciplinary field. Second, there is a need for a proper understanding of the historical process. Third, historical-contextual, hermeneutical and theological approaches to the field cannot claim to be exclusive, but are mutually complementary."¹²

Since the first two approaches have had their fair share of exponents, let us look at the third. Here a "three-phase procedure" is recommended.¹³ The first step is to offer a "thick description of the aspect of experience being studied"; the second is to mount a "critical analysis of the phenomenon under scrutiny"; the third is to propose a "constructive interpretation." In the first stage, among other things, a phenomenological description will be appropriate. To do that, observation of both formal and structured as well as informal praxis will be necessary. The tool of 'participant observation'¹⁴ regularly employed in the social sciences may be of assistance here, provided a 'hermeneutical approach' that yields a 'thick description' is followed. Proposed by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, it is characterised by a detailed description' of the culture that surrounds and situates spirituality.¹⁵

¹² Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 2nd edition, (London: SPCK, 2000): 5

¹³ The following is based loosely on Sandra Schneiders, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline' in *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* vol.6, no.1 (spring 1998), 2-12.

¹⁴ See Danny L. Jorgensen, *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1993)

¹⁵ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (London: Fontana, 1993): 6 ff.

For the second step the theology of that particular spirituality will be a significant strand in analysing the phenomenon. This is necessary because spirituality is by nature not a free-floating phenomena but an experience that has certain theological foundations on which it is based.¹⁶ Besides theology, it would also be necessary to bring to bear the social sciences, economics and politics and other such disciplines so as to help us discover the determinants that play their part in the shaping of spirituality. Such an interdisciplinary conversation will allow for the multidimensional character of the spirituality to be displayed.¹⁷

The third step in the study of spirituality will be offering an interpretation. After having provided a thick description and identified the determinants that shape these movements a holistic interpretation will be necessary. One objective of such an interpretation will be to understand ways of meaning making that are being attempted by these movements. What is it, that in the final analysis, is being forged here? How are they accomplishing that? What does that mean for themselves and for the wider church and wider world? These are some questions that will attract attention. In order to help answer such questions and get a grasp of such meaning making strategies, it would certainly help to allow critical lenses, for example, like postcolonial criticism, to assist us look at and see through such strategies. They could allow us to speak of and speak for, besides facilitating the very voice of these movements be heard loud and clear.

Conclusion

One caveat is necessary here. Though this approach is a suggestive way forward, I admit that it is not without its practical difficulties. The merging of disparate disciplines all the while maintaining coherence, not to say anything about the potential clash of ideological undercurrents

¹⁶ Schneiders explains: "Spirituality as lived experience is, by definition, determined by the particular ultimate value within the horizon of which the life project is pursued. Consequently, it involves intrinsically some relatively coherent and articulate understanding of both the human being and the horizon of ultimate value, some historical tradition, some symbol system and so on."

¹⁷ One example could be Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* 2 edition, (London: Routledge, 2001).

within these diverse methods, is not going to be a simple and straight forward exercise. Yet this three-phased process seems to hold some potential for the study of indigenous Christianity.¹⁸ To me three particular features appeal. First the phenomenological integrity of indigenous Christian spirituality is respected. Lived experience is studied on its own merit and not subordinated to other disciplinary concerns. Second provision for an adequate recognition of historical and theological determinants is made. The study of indigenous Christianity does not remain at the level of mere descriptive ethnography but rather a more nuanced appreciation among other things of the mystical quality of the subject is facilitated. And third the concrete embodiment of indigenous Christian spirituality in its cultural and social contexts is seriously reckoned with. Lest indigenous Christian spirituality take mystical flight or for that matter remain at the level of simple descriptive ethnography, this method enables us to dress it with earthly clothing and understand its human character just as it allows for an appreciation of its more spiritual dimensions. This pattern of description, analysis and interpretation I believe enables the scholar to appreciate indigenous Christianity in all its technicolour variety, which may not only succeed in mounting a mature and wholesome representation of, but also assist in pointing out causes for concern that may very well reside within those movements.

South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies,
Bangalore, India.

pauljoshuab@gmail.com

¹⁸ The major difficulty that I have with Schneiders' methodology is her almost naïve appropriation of the disciplines for the study of spirituality. It is as if she implies that there exists one official version of anthropology, for example, with little diversity that one can employ in a more or less straight-forward sense. Tallal Assad's [Tallal Assad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993)] work for example, has thrown serious doubt on the ideological innocence of the discipline and hence if use is to be made of any critical discipline discernment of among other things, these ideological currents will be necessary.

Lived Religion: India's Many Indigenous Christianities

Rowena Robinson

The author is Professor of Sociology at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Bombay and currently Visiting Professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati. In this article, the author provides some glimpses of what an observation and analysis of Christian life in India might reveal to those interested in Christianity and its scholarship. The many worlds of indigenous Indian Christianity render topsy-turvy some of Western scholarship's presumptions regarding the study of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Rowena Robinson provides seven key points of reference which help to identify the unique profile of Indian Indigenous Christianities.

Introduction

The relationship between anthropology and Christianity has been fraught with difficulties. Anthropology claims the domain and the ethos of the 'secular', and persons with committed religious beliefs might find it hard to convince others in the discipline of their seriousness and impartiality. Indeed, some scholars hold that anthropology has an elective affinity with the idea and premises of secularism. It is thus no surprise that Christianity was perhaps the last world religion to be taken as a significant object of study by anthropologists. The search for the exotic as well as the ability to deal with beliefs – so long as these were the beliefs of somebody else – meant that tribal religions, Hinduism and Islam could far more easily be accommodated within the scope of

anthropological study than something as uncomfortably close and familiar as Christianity. In the process, the Christian foundation of many of sociology's and anthropology's core concepts and ideas, including, ironically, that key idea of secularism itself, remained unquestioned and taken-for-granted.

In India, as I have noted elsewhere, the merging of Indological and anthropological discourses foregrounded Hinduism as the core religion to be studied.¹ Indology provided the principle whereby the entire civilization was structured: that principle was the twinning of caste with Hinduism. Caste became the major link bonding the field studies of anthropology with Indological texts. India was Hindu and Hinduism was caste. As Dumont would argue later, *Homo hierarchicus* stands in unique contrast and, indeed, opposition to the West, i.e., to *Homo equalis*. Within this framework, Christianity could not obviously be cast as a suitable subject of study.

In fact, when Caplan wrote his full-length work on Protestants in Chennai (then Madras) in 1987 this kind of study was still a novelty. Of course, the change since that time has been dramatic and today we have many sophisticated analyses of both Christian and Protestant communities in India, and some studies of new Christian movements as well. At the same time, and unlike in the West to an extent, it is probably true that when anthropologists in India studied religion, they usually studied their own religion. This was certainly the case with the study of Islam, Christianity and even Hinduism. Were the implications of this positive for scholarship?

Today, the question regarding how any religion – particularly Christianity – can, in Beyer's words, 'be thought of or lived as a singular identity' across the globe is being taken very seriously.² In the rest of this presentation, therefore, I will try to bring out seven aspects that I think are interesting and important about Indian Christianity. The seven aspects dwelt on here do not cover all facets of the study of Indian Christianity. Indeed, some are notably absent. However, I consider

¹ Rowena Robinson, *Christians of India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003)

² Peter Beyer, "De-Centring Religious Singularity: The Globalization of Christianity as a Case in Point", in *Numen* 50, 4 (2003): 357.

that they are our key to understanding of what is different about lived Christianity in a world of overlapping cultures and a plurality of religions.

Seven Aspects of Indian Christianity

1. *Difference without Divisiveness*

In 2005, Elizabeth McKeown suggested that Christian Studies have remained largely within the parameters of a Protestant/Christian imagination, and in an intensely plural world needs to move beyond this representation.³ Western Christianity's history of protestant movements and sectarian break ups prepares us for a construction of that religion in terms of grim ruptures and bleak separations. In India, even in a region such as Goa where conversion to Christianity was backed by the Inquisition and the regime was ordered by a strict repugnance of all indigenous 'substance', dissimilarities might bring out diversity without necessarily appearing as hierarchical oppositions or as deep divisions.

In Goa, Christianity was largely confined to the districts touching the coast, where whole villages were converted to the new faith. Converts lived surrounded by the inland Hindu districts, but had fewer day-to-day interactions with Hindus for most of the period of colonial rule. Social separateness was achieved, though cultural traditions remained alive. In terms of their substance, the signs and symbols of the Hindu and Christian religious calendars differed, but were mapped out in structurally similar way. In the regional Hindu religio-agricultural calendar, the festive year began with the celebration of the harvest centered around the birth of Lord Ganesh, marked in August or early September. The worship of Ganesh is usually performed by the head of the family. An earthen image of the deity is installed on a dais under an arch decorated with flowers, leaves, fruits and vegetables. The principal offering is twenty-one *modaks* – a sweet prepared from lentils and unrefined sugar – served on a banana leaf. On the following day, the new paddy is offered to the deity. The deity is usually immersed on this day, being carried to a nearby river in procession.

The celebration of the harvest feast among Christians shows traces of continuity with indigenous traditions. The celebrations are usually

³ Elizabeth McKeown, "Christian studies", in *US Christian historian* 23, 2 (2005): 63.

centered around the feast of a particular saint, which happens to fall during the harvest season. The feast commences with a procession to the paddy fields, accompanied by the sounds of beating drums and the playing of music. The parish priest ritually cuts a few ears of grain and these are carried back to the church. As the ears of grain may be placed before the image of Ganesh, so some ears of grain are placed in the arms of the saint in whose name the feast is celebrated. Flowers and vegetables of the season are also placed at the altar in offering. Far from ignoring or denying these cultural similarities with their Hindu neighbors, Goan Christians refer to their harvest feast, the *konnsachem fest*, *konos* meaning grain, as *amchi Gonsha*, *our* Ganesh.

In another instance, the village of Cuncolim in Goa's Salcete district determinedly resisted conversion. Christianity came to this village like a whirlwind, destroying temples and taking lives. When further struggle seemed hopeless, the icons of the destroyed temple of Cuncolim were secretly transported to the village of Fatorpa in an area south of Salcete that was not at the time under Portuguese control. Here a new temple to the deity Shantadurga was set up and all the ceremonies re-established. Every year, the image of Shantadurga is transported back to Cuncolim during the Hindu month of Falguna. Aarti' is performed by a spot near where the killing took place during the temple's demolition. Two bands play during the celebration: one Hindu and the other Christian. Through the festival links are maintained between the people of Cuncolim and the goddess Shantadurga, who is viewed as a powerful divine figure. Christians often visit the temple of the goddess, particularly during the period of her festival (*zatra*), to ask for favors: success, the birth of a child and so on. In return they make vows of donations of gifts or money.

Throughout Goa, people tell stories of the 'seven sisters' who were once represented by seven temples in the region.⁴ The story goes that some of the sisters were converted to Christianity, such as Our Lady of Cures at Cansaulim and Our Lady of Miracles at Mapusa.⁵ The Shantadurga temple at Fatorpa remained Hindu, but the tale of the

⁴ Robert Newman, "The Umbrellas of Cuncolim: A Study of Goan Identity", *Proceedings of the Eighth International Symposium on Asian Studies* 1986, 4 (1987): 1105-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*

'seven sisters' provides the mythical justification for the participation of Christians in this sacred world of the Hindus.

The relationship of Western Christianity with its Protestant (or Islamic) Other may cause it to be overly familiar with the structure and grammar of religious divisions. However, as Visvanathan shows for Syrian Christianity in Kerala, in Goa too, the boundaries between the Christians and Hindus are at moments exceedingly blurred, yet they do not also entirely disappear.⁶ Each group maintains its individuality within Goan society, aware of and accepting similarities and points of contact, as well as differences. I would argue, the more illuminating imagery may be that of Uberoi's 'frontier', a corridor which interconnects even as it separates; a zone of fluidity as well as of contestation.⁷

2. *De-centering and Historicizing Christianity*

Different and particular discursive histories led scholars of theology, religious studies and even anthropology, both in the heart of the West as well as in India, to focus on what Christianity 'took' from the religions before or around it. Christianity's 'self-absorbed' understanding of its own origins celebrates its capacity to incorporate elements of what existed before it – pre-Christian traditions and symbols – and to make them its own. In relation to the colonies where Christianity spread, this adaptive ability is stressed to show Christianity's flexible adjustment to a range of cultures. Paradoxically, the preoccupation with Hinduism in studies of India meant that, similarly, when other communities were studied they were first analyzed for what they had 'received' from Hinduism – whether this was caste, in the first instance, or forms of ritual such as life-crisis rituals and the like.

Mosse's tantalizingly brief account of a Hindu goddess in an area where Christianity has been around for some three centuries or so

Susan Visvanathan, *The Christians of Kerala: History, Belief and Ritual Among the 'akoba* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1993)

J P S Uberoi, "The structural concept of the Asian frontier", In Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, ed., *History and society: Essays in honor of Niharranjan Ray* (Calcutta: K P Bagchi, 1978), 73; see also M. Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and memory in the north-west frontier* (Oxford: James Currey, 2000): 25

gives a fascinating glimpse of the kind of intricate interweaving of traditions that could be revealed when one looks not at 'Hinduism' lending or Christianity 'adapting' but at the complex and contradictory terrain of cultural interactions as a whole.⁸ As he shows, the Virgin is represented as having only benign or what are considered, in this south Indian region, 'cool' powers. Sexuality and death are banished from her immaculate presence, crushed in the form of the serpent beneath her feet. Desire, power and the capacity for unpredictability and evil are projected onto various Hindu goddesses.

However, Hindus also appear to attribute to the ordinarily violent local virgin goddesses some of the features associated with Mary. At Aranmanakaria, there is a shrine to a Hindu virgin goddess. The goddess is known as 'child birth chaste'. Myths about the foundation of the shrine link the goddess to milk, a substance that is associated with coolness, and childbirth. Virgin goddesses within the Hindu tradition are known to be angered if approached by women in states of pollution. Unlike other virgin goddesses, though, the one here is like the Virgin Mary apparently unaffected by and tolerant towards birth pollution. Her power is conceived of as benevolent, indulgent and cool. Popular Christianity may well have seeped, over the centuries, into the local Hindu cults.

What might be recollected is that in a plural context such as India, Christianity is one among many religions. Any understanding of relationships across margins must be freed from a perspective that 'centers' one religion and 'peripheralizes' the other. It may make Christians uncomfortable to see how symbols and myths can leak across boundaries, without any 'conversion' – even nominal – taking place. Yet, Mosse's tale reminds us that access to the divine or to the symbols of sacred power is hardly tightly controlled, either by priestly sanction or the assumed limits of community. Once one comprehends a world in which plurality confounds the possibility of neatly ordering 'center' and 'margins', one may perceive how Christianity and Hinduism may simultaneously impact on a third and different religious

⁸ David Mosse, "Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: A Study of Social Organization and Religion in Rural Ramnad", *D. Phil thesis* (University of Oxford, 1986): 452-3.

and cultural environment. This is what happened among some tribal communities in the north-east of the country. Further, Christianity might get 'Hindu' ideas through the grid of Islam, or vice versa. It appears to me that understanding these processes requires both complicating and historicizing them.

1. *The Sacred is 'Sticky' and Seeps into the Secular*

Though Durkheim employed the notion of the 'taboo' to demarcate the sacred from the secular, he acknowledged that the sacred is a slippery thing, it cannot be easily contained, it attaches itself by contiguity or association to all manner of objects or even persons. The Christian church in India has engaged in a continuous process of 'conversion' or 'civilizing', trying to wean adherents away from practices, rituals and beliefs that are considered incompatible with Christian 'decency' or the 'proper' Christian life.

Thus, two processes have emerged. One, the embedding of Christian ideas into practices and rituals considered non-Christian and, two, the unofficial permitting of rituals that take place outside the church, and in the domestic sphere, by deeming them as belonging to the sphere of the mundane and ordinary, merely 'cultural' rather than 'religious'.⁹ Thus, as Kujur shows, the local church has learned to acquiesce with aspects of tribal culture, such as the *chhathi* ceremony or the *Karam* festival.¹⁰ Though baptisms are performed only within the church under priestly administration, the *chhathi* performed in the house is the initiation ritual of a child into the tribal community. The symbolic objects used such as rice-beer symbolize life and prosperity, the winnowing fan represents the different clans of the village and paddy is used for the divination of the name. Such processes may ease integration for tribal communities, but they remain at the level of rituals, and do not engage with traditional tribal beliefs.

Even more challenging for the church is the enveloping world of sacred beings within which tribals live. For tribal communities in central

Peggy Froerer, *Religious division and social conflict: The emergence of Hindu nationalism in rural India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2007): 102.

⁹ Joseph Marianus Kujur, "Tribal church in the margins: Oraons of Central India", in Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, eds., *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), 41.

India, the world of the sacred extends far beyond Christ or the saints. Beings, malevolent and benevolent, including village deities and ancestral spirits, extend their influence over people – they inhabit stones or rivers or parts of houses, and may even come to reside within certain individuals. The Christian church labels all these beings as forms of the Devil or Shaitan. Nevertheless, it remains one of the trickiest areas of Christian negotiation. Froerer argues that the priests preach to the Oraon of central India that they must choose between Jesus and these Satanic beings.¹¹ However, the Oraon are unable to understand Jesus as standing completely apart from their traditional divine beings.

There is another aspect of the relationship between the secular and the sacred that we need to dwell on a little. In the south Asian context, and certainly in India, the church is not merely a closed religious 'institution' or establishment with a well-defined clerical hierarchy and speaking with one voice on issues of spiritual concern. Collapsing the divide between the sacred and the secular, the church should be viewed, more significantly, as an arena and as a resource – real as well as symbolic. The church as arena is not mere metaphor. The example of the church of Vadakkankulam which, spatially and in terms of rights and privileges became the battleground for the caste wars between the Vellalars and the Nadars is well-known; indeed, notorious. While such relations between church-members are based on caste status, the ownership of land or control within the local *panchayats*, (i.e., socio-politically and economically based), the church maintains and articulates them. Honors, rights and privileges in church ritual have importance in themselves and because they signify authority or stature in the community. They constitute as well as express social relationships and political authority.

Even from within, the church and its related institutions need to be understood as differentiated and contested spaces; they have been the context for discrimination as well as the reproduction of caste and social privilege. As scholars have shown for Tamil Nadu, even for Dalits in the *clergy*, the church manifests itself as a 'caste' church with systematic and consequential prejudice, producing - in effect -

¹¹ Peggy Froerer, *Religious division and social conflict: The emergence of Hindu nationalism in rural India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2007)

discrimination as normal. It seems to me, if viewed as the centre of relations of power and hierarchy within the community, the church is clearly not merely an 'agency of supernatural salvation'. In the tumultuous context of Dalit struggles all over India, the relevance of the church will be measured in large part by its capacity to position itself as a vehicle of change, an active altering agent in the current social and political dynamics.¹²

4. Dualism Challenged and Subdued

The earlier point leads us directly to this. It is apparent that one of the greatest difficulties for communities in the south Asian context is to divide the world, particularly the world of the sacred, sharply and unambiguously into 'good' and 'evil', Christ *versus* Satan. Saint James is the patron of the village described by Mosse, who guards its territory.¹³ The Hindu deities of the village are subordinate to his authority. The god Muniaiyar is represented as guarding the south door of Saint James' church and punishing those who make false oaths in the church. Muniaiyar is, in fact, only playing a role he already plays for the Hindu village god Aiyanar: that of subordinate or guardian deity.

Thus, while Saint James is said to violently punish those who offend him the actual punitive role is assigned the Hindu god Muniaiyar. Christian divinities retain the pure and holy powers; the more violent ones are projected onto their Hindu divine subordinates. Nevertheless, Hindu gods and goddesses are not demonized. What really occurs is a split between benevolent and violent powers of the Christian deities. Saint James derives his power from Christ and the Virgin, yet his power is more violent and more circumscribed than theirs. They are benign and their power is universal. He is more vengeful and his power is confined to the village. Muniaiyar is said to enact the punishment; but he is acting on behalf of Saint James and in his name. The reality of the world of these Christians is one of shared social interaction with village Hindus.

¹² Felix Wilfred, "Christianity in Hindu polytheistic structural mould. Converts in southern Tamilnadu respond to an alien religion during 'the Vasco da Gama epoch'", *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 43, 103 (1998): 82.

¹³ David Mosse, "Christian Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu, India", *Man* (N.S.) 29, 2 (1994): 313.

Saint James is also a deity of the 'forest', the world of chaos and disorder outside the realm of structured social life. It is in the realm of the 'forest', exterior to the village, that Christian divinities are able to assume the aspects of absolute purity and goodness. Evil is then taken on by ghosts, spirits of the dead and Hindu divinities of the lower end of the pantheon, who are exorcised by Saint James in his form as 'saint of the forest'.¹⁴ Thus, a radical divide is clearly difficult to achieve and obtains only when the world of the sacred is viewed outside the social and ritual context of the village.

I may point out, though, that nobody lives in the forest and it is in the everyday world of religions embedded in intersecting social and ritual matrices that Christians and the church could learn perhaps not just from observing 'God' or 'a ray of Truth' in the Other, but also understanding how that 'truth' might challenge some of their own certainties. India has produced many theologies, the Brahminical theology of a Brahmbandhab Upadhyay or the Dalit theologies of today, and thinkers whose work remains marginal, though (or perhaps because) they have pushed the boundaries of canonical thought with particular reference to the relationship between Christianity and other faiths.

5. *The Centrality of Mary*

The opposition between Mary and Eve in Christian theological discourses brings out again the dualism between 'good' and 'evil' we have just spoken of. In the case of the feminine divine, this translates into a struggle between virginal purity and sexuality, fertility and power. Indian Christianity sees the full flourishing of the feminine principle within the Christian faith. Indeed, one may venture to argue that without Mary, Christian devotion would be incomplete and commitment to the faith far feebler. At the same time, most Christian communities disregard the fine doctrinal distinction between the 'worship' and 'veneration' of Mary and the saints. Moreover, by casting Mary, for the most part, in her maternal aspect as 'Mother', they suppress all reference to her virginity, a motif so critical in Christian theological discourse.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 321

¹⁵ Cf. Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, hegemony and capitalist transformation in a south Indian fishing community* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Limited, 1991)

Our Lady of Velankanni, for instance, Bayly shows, is portrayed not as benign protector, but as warrior and conqueror.¹⁶ In fact, the term *shakti* refers to her supernatural powers. Kalpana Ram seems to suggest that the possibility of the sacred dualism between the 'pure' and the 'evil' may be achieved through the attribution of the 'evil' qualities to Hindu female divinities, while the Maataa is ascribed only redemptive and benign healing powers. What is symbolized thereby also partakes of wider south Asian notions regarding the opposition of the 'good' woman and the 'bad' woman. In her ethnography of the Mukkuvar fisher-folk of Tamil Nadu, Ram perceives a split in the conception of the feminine divine in their popular Christianity.¹⁷ Good and evil are symbolized and incarnated by the figures of Mary and the local Hindu goddess Eseki, respectively. While Mary is seen as completely benevolent and confined to her maternal and nurturing role (good femininity) all the unruly aspects of the feminine - desire, power and the capacity for unpredictability and evil - are projected onto the figure of Eseki. At the same time, I would suggest that the presence of the figure of Eseki testifies to the need to contend with and represent the disorderly aspects of the feminine, which are denied by the figure of the eternally placid Mary of official Christian discourses.

6. The Importance of the Body

In most non-Western cultures, including India, the idea of 'belief', if understood as enduring and internalized convictions regarding a consistent set of religious propositions, becomes somewhat problematic. At the same time, the idea of belief is not completely absent: it may be more situational or the result of a voluntary act, a 'will to believe', as it were, associated with certain performative powers.¹⁸ In other words, as Kirsch argues, 'believing means acting'. To this I may also add that belief is not abstract but concretized and material. It is, crucially, *embodied*.

Belief in the Indian Christian context is experienced by the body, whether it is in the wearing of crucifixes or rosaries close to the body

¹⁶ Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in south Indian society, 1700-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 368

¹⁷ Cf. Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women op.cit*

¹⁸ Thomas G. Kirsch, "Restaging the will to believe: Religious pluralism, anti-syncretism, and the problem of belief", *American anthropologist* 106, 4 (2004): 707.

or in the kissing of the feet of statues of the saints or Mary or Jesus or drinking or applying to the body, for healing purposes, water that has been used to wash such images. Belief is contextualized in terms of its efficacy for the material aspects of life and well-being: these include many inter-related things such as the health of body and mind, the fulfillment of physical, educational and occupational needs or the protection from forms of oppression and degradation. So entangled are the worlds of the spirit and the body, that illness, accidents or misfortune are understood as the work of possession by one or other of a variety of divine beings or the ghosts of dead ancestors.

Morality and sinfulness, reward and punishment, providence and misfortune are not mere intangible notions located solely within a framework of salvation. They are the 'real' outcomes of the actions of divine beings, which engage and implicate persons and their bodies and their lives in *this* world. Sometimes, the punitive and evil powers that bring misfortune, evil and illness through possession are assigned to Hindu gods and goddesses and, sometimes, these are assigned to Christian saints, though never to Christ or Mary. In several cases, the narratives of possession reveal ruptures in kin and community relationships that the healing process must also address. The spiritual struggles of good and evil are experienced on the terrain of Indian Christianity, in immediate and *this-worldly form*, as battles of exorcism wherein wickedness or conflict rage through the possessed body and must be physically expelled or ritually and socially contained.

Despite its ideas of the resurrection of the 'body', Christianity disdains the flesh, sexuality and even relations of consanguinity and kinship. It focuses its gaze firmly on the spirit, on the other world and on the universal community of believers.¹⁹ Yet, the very idea that the divide between spirit and flesh and the primacy of the first over the second are universal concepts is contradicted by ethnographic accounts from everywhere, and certainly from India. This means, to paraphrase Howell, that if we are to take the subject position of the Indian Christian as a 'fully-formed standpoint', we must refocus the conversation 'on the embodied, lived and relational aspects' of religion not as incidental

¹⁹ See Fenella Cannell, "The Christianity of anthropology", in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 11, 2 (2005): 335-356.

or merely 'cultural' manifestations but as central to the Christian identity itself.²⁰

7. *The Plurality of Texts, And the De-centering of the Text*

The preceding discussions have drawn us into understanding the complexities of the relationship between 'text' and 'context'. These also make us all too aware of the fact that we cannot take it for granted that the Christian faith, wherever it is found around the world, is 'text-centered' or text-circumscribed, that *text* being, of course, the Bible. Schmalz has analyzed stories, couplets and aphorisms through which Dalit Christians contest both their location as a marginal and stigmatized community and distill their own understanding of themselves as Isai.²¹ The universal 'power of the Word' takes on a whole different meaning when quotations from the Bible itself are inscribed on mud walls and the seeker achieves, to quote, a 'textualized identity' that is wholly contextual!

In many Indian Christian communities, for instance, the influence of the ancestors may be assimilated with the power of God or Jesus Christ through ritual practices that are tied at once into the domains of kinship, descent and spirituality *without*, as Toren puts it in her analysis of Fijian Christianity, 'explicit acknowledgment in any church service or Christian prayer or Bible story...of the continuing existence of the ancestors'.²² In particular, the axis of misfortune and healing tends to lie at the heart of this dialogue in different communities. Stories, myths, folktales, local theologies, folk music, rituals and performances, forms of devotion to popular saints and even the sounds of the 'drum' have been written about by a number of scholars as being crucial to the

²⁰ Brian M. Howell, "The repugnant cultural other speaks back: Christian identity as ethnographic 'standpoint'", *Anthropological theory* 7, 4 (2007): 381.

²¹ Mathew Schmalz, "Charismatic transgressions: The life and work of an Indian Christian healer", In Selva Raj and Corinne Dempsey, eds., *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the lines* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 163-187; see also, Mathew Schmalz, "The broken mirror: John Masih's journey from Isai to Dalit", In Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur eds., *Margins of Faith: Dalit and tribal Christianity in India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010), 185-209.

²² Christina Toren, "The effectiveness of ritual", In Fanella Cannell, ed., *The anthropology of Christianity*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 195.

making of the 'lived', vernacular Christian identity in different parts of India. If we were to employ the metaphor of 'culture-as-text', it is to this ensemble of 'textual' practices that we must pay closer attention.²³

Conclusion

The global practice of Christianity cannot be taken for granted as something transparent or interpretable by universal theories. In the context of India, certainly, conversion to Christianity may not be that single transformative event and may not, indeed, be considered irreversible or exclusive. Christianity may be viewed as 'new' or just as a local religion competing with other local religions within the shared space of the sacred. The priorities and commitments, the beliefs and practices, the forms of faith and ritual of varied Christian communities may differ significantly; further, they construct their own mythologies and histories steeped in local color, their own sense of themselves in their regions and in the world, their own particular identities.

Taken forward, the themes I have raised may help in a small way in understanding how indigenous Indian Christian communities construct themselves and how this changes the ways in which we think about global Christianity, the nature of faith as well as, broadly, the modern study of religion. In the end, what these themes could contribute to Christian studies scholarship will depend crucially on the questions we are prepared to put to ourselves about what it means to be 'Christian' in different and distinct parts of the globe.

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
IIT Guwahati
rowena@iitb.ac.in

²³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973)

Embedded Resonances as Latent Forms of Indigenous Christianities

Gnana Patrick

The author is Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. Beyond our conscious effort to create indigenous Christianities, we find them happening ‘as if on their own’. They are resonances of Christianity deeply embedded in other religious individuals or traditions. This article explores very briefly two instances – one a famous subaltern leader of the nineteenth century, and the other a subaltern religious phenomenon called as Ayya Vazhi. Both the instances demonstrate the presence of deeply embedded Christian resonances in them, and these resonances have happened without our conscious efforts, witnessing, perhaps, to the presence of the “Spirit that blows where it wills”.

Introduction

To understand the way Christianity in India becomes indigenous, we tend to look at the well known initiatives: the Catholic tradition thinks of adaptation, inculturation and inter-religious dialogue; the Protestant tradition searches for efforts whereby the proclamation of the Gospel fructifies in the emergence of indigenous Christian thinkers / groups (e.g. *Rethinking Christianity in India*) or Indianised quasi-ecclesial structures like *Christo Samaj*, *Kristadvaita*, etc; the Pentecostal tradition looks at the formation of indigenous preachers, missions, assemblies,¹ and independent churches. These fruits are born out of ‘our’ missionary or evangelising efforts at making Christianity indigenous.

¹ Cf. Roger E. Hedlund, *India's Churches of Indigenous Origin – Quest for Identity* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2000)

Prof. Felix Wilfred has pointed out to another manner of Christianity becoming indigenous, by which the people themselves ‘appropriate’ Christianity as part of the “process of making faith one’s own, or weaving faith into one’s own life, praxis, vision, attitude, and so on.”² This point is insightful in order to understand the people as subjects of their faith experience, and has the “great advantage of viewing faith in dynamic interaction with the subject and her socio-economic world.”³ It takes us beyond the traditional sites of indigenous Christianity, mentioned above, where the evangelisers are said to have sowed the seeds through missionary endeavours.

Can we look more deeply? There are sites where we find latent forms of indigenised Christianities, which are Christian resonances deeply integrated into other religio-cultural traditions or personalities. They are resonances born not out of any fully conscious efforts at ‘inculturation’, and ‘indigenisation’, but of ‘in-spiration’ (= ‘to breathe into the other’), an activity, we believe, is of the Spirit of God, whose work we have participated in even without our awareness. The ‘Spirit blows where it wills’, and we ‘join in with the Spirit in its mission’.⁴ None of us can claim full merit for such fruitions, which provoke awe and wonder, praise and thanks to the Spirit of God that blows where it wills. From this pneumatological perspective, we are able to identify resonances of Christianity in personalities or phenomena of other religio-cultural traditions. They are kind of ‘embedded resonances’, and they are neither ‘our’ projects, nor ‘their’ projects. They happen in contexts where different others exist together with their uniqueness, strength and inspiration. Our efforts are there to the extent we have been involved in them with the *force of our commitment*.

Understanding the resonances of a particular religion in another is a way of getting awakened to the rich dynamics of religiosity which goes beyond our intentional spheres; it enables humanity to drink from the wells of religiosity, from its fountainhead. Religiosity knows no

² Felix Wilfred, “Appropriation of Faith in a Religiously Pluralist Asian Context,” in Felix Wilfred, *Margins – Site of Asian Theologies*, (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008): 137.

³ *Ibid.*, 138

⁴ Kirsteen Kim develops this pneumatological theme in her book, *Joining in with the Spirit – Connecting World Church and Local Mission* (London: SCM Press, 2010, 2012)

boundaries, and it streams out into the open fields, and creates its own formations, resulting in layers of interactive spheres. Such formations come about only when the traditions are capable of mediating genuine experiences of religiosity. Every particular religious tradition needs to cultivate its capability by living out its religious experience- its *originary* experience with sincere commitment. The genuineness of living out one's tradition obtains 's-p-i-r-a-t-i-o-n' that emits inspirational resonances which go beyond their particular spheres of religious experiences.⁵ Needless to say that one can find such formations from the point of view of every religious tradition. When Stephen Fuchs explored the religious terrain of India and came out with the insights of 'messianic movements' operative in the Indian soil, he exhibited openness towards every religious tradition. He said, "[A] study of the messianic movements in India is interesting also for the reason that in India many such movements are caused or inspired not merely by the infiltration of western culture and by the Christian religion in its various denominations, but also by Hindu and Muslim cultures and religions in their different forms. Thus the modern general theories about Messianic movements will have to be modified and cannot simply be restricted to the orbit of western culture and Christian religion as against native culture and religion."⁶

I can anticipate the obvious objection that if these 'resonances' are not due to our conscious *missionary* efforts, then how can we continue to be committed to our mission command "Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28: 19)? The implementation of the mission command is to be found more in *living out* the Christian inspiration, more in its strength of practice, rather than the verbal-centric (logo-centrally apologetic at that) proclamation. Practice has its

⁵ Our actions are ridden with intentionalities, and any articulation of our action is much more ridden with them. While acknowledging this fact, I think of two types of intentionalities: one instrumentally premised intentionality, and the other commitment oriented intentionality. While the former operates with visible intentionality to gain advantages, the latter works as an inspiration to commit oneself for a creative and transformative action in a self-effacing manner.

⁶ Stephen Fuchs, *Godmen on the Warpath – A Study of the Messianic Movements in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1992): xiv.

communicative resonances, which are perhaps more enduring and substantive.

Endeavouring to free myself from dangers of exclusivism or inclusivism⁷, I wish to explore the resonances of Christianity in personalities and phenomena of other religio-cultural traditions. I would like to do this by exploring two instances: one, the life of Mahatma Jotirao Phule as an individual and the other, Ayya Vazhi as a religious phenomenon, both from outside the frontiers of Christianity.⁷

Mahatma Jotirao Govindrao Phule

As we all know, Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) lived in the nineteenth century Maharashtra, worked strenuously for the uplift of the socially oppressed people, and became one of the early voices for the liberation of the subalterns of India. We generally know his social intervention, but much less about his religious orientation.

Phule believed in a Creator God, a God who created everything, to whom, we in turn have to offer our gifts in gratitude in the form of 'righteous conduct of treating one another with freedom, dignity and fraternity'. He wrote the 33 *akhandas*⁸ wherein he expounded the ethical conduct as a response to the Creator's gift of creation. In his *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak*, he presents these *akhandas* which dwell upon the criteria for the practice of righteous conduct. Some of the salient ones are: 1) Those who admit that men and women have

⁷ I find the relevance of such an attempt in the contemporary context of plurality of religions, "public religion", and the ardent search for meaningful ways of dialogues and interactions between religions. An age of public religion, if not attuned to healthy interactions and mutuality, can engender intransigent particularities, resulting in mutual animosity rather than open relationship. How do we then envisage this relationship to happen is the most vital question today! Our age witnesses certain zeal on the part of every religious tradition for "conversion" of others. We find "missionaries" in every other major religious tradition today. Those who involve in such "missionary activities" argue that the zeal to spread is part and parcel of the very religious experience, and if we are genuinely involved in a religious experience, it spontaneously leads us to make active which immediately weakens the very vitality of religious experiences. Such a difficulty looms large in the contemporary horizon wherein the instrumentalist reasoning is present in all walks of life.

⁸ Phule used the term 'akanda' instead of the existing word 'abhanga', which means a devotional poetry.

been born independent from birth and are capable of enjoying every right, can be said to practise righteous conduct; 2) Those who do not worship the stars and stones, but have respect for the Nirmik (Creator) of the universe can be said to practise righteous conduct; 3) Those who do not let other creatures enjoy all the things created by the Creator, but offer them in worship to the Nirmik, cannot be said to practise righteous conduct; 4) Those who express gratitude to the creator, who has created all things which we are using in this world, can be said to practise righteous conduct, etc.⁹

In his understanding of the righteous conduct and creator God, we can find resonances of Christianity. A play written by Phule, by name *Tratiya Ratna (Netra)*, meaning the 'Third Eye', is a good indicator of the Christian resonances in him. The play portrays three important characters: one a cultivator couple, ignorant and 'superstitious'; second, a Brahmin priest; and third, a Christian missionary. The story is of how the Brahmin convinces the couple to perform certain ceremonies and to throw open a feast to the Brahmins as propitiatory rituals to ward off an impending danger to befall their unborn child due to the conjunction of certain planetary movement. The couple undertake the propitiation ceremonies and offer the feast. While the feast is on, the couple are made to stand under the hot sun, not being allowed to dine with the Brahmins. At that time, a Christian missionary comes over to the couple, and teaches a new religion whereby he exhorted them to believe in the one true God, and not believe in any idols which would extort propitiations.

The missionary's role, along with the education the British brought, were considered the third eye, the *Traitiya Ratna (Netra)* in the play. The missionary's role can be said to stand for the Christian resonance, which inspired Phule to believe in a Creator God, who could be the source of human aspiration for justice and freedom. In the nineteenth century Maharastrian context, that too in the vicinity of Peshawas' rule, the faith in a Creator God who made everyone in God's "image and likeness", and therefore, radically equal, could challenge the existing

⁹ Cf. Archana Malik-Goure, *Jyotiba Phule – A Modern Indian Philosopher* (New Delhi: Suryodaya Books, 2013): 67.

belief system that sustained a hierarchical order of society. In the words of Rosalind O'Hanlon, the faith in the Creator God carried

the idea that God, as the unique Creator, constitutes the source of justice for human society. The traditional idea of *karma* had, of course, its own very strong notions of justice. This had a considerable potential strength against attempts at social reform. But Phule set out to undermine the very idea of *karma* by projecting the Creator as a beneficent being who constituted an impartial court of appeal for essentially present causes. Justice on this view stems from a determinate and just Creator who is outside contemporary social arrangements, rather than consisting in those very social arrangements themselves, as the status of different individuals reflected their conduct in previous existences. In this way, the legitimisation, in *karma*, for social divisions and hierarchies, collapses, and they appear as the mere constructs of self-interest... Phule relocates the source of moral order within the beneficent deity. This time it is a moral order much closer to the Christian one, regarding the present life of the individual as the centre of moral concern, and all individuals as equal before their Creator.¹⁰

This, then, is a typical example where Christian resonances are clearly found in a subaltern leader. Following is an instance of a subaltern religious tradition, known as *Ayya Vazhi*, wherein we find resonances of Christianity deeply integrated.

Ayya Vazhi

Ayya Vazhi originated during the first part of the nineteenth century in South Travancore, part of which is the present district of Kanyakumari. Religiously speaking, it was a context characterised by the evangelical missionary discourse of the London Missionary Society on the one hand, and the royally patronaged Vaishnavite religious tradition on the other. Between these two publicly visible traditions, there were many folk religious traditions practised by the wider sections of the society. It was in this religious context, a new religious

¹⁰ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology – Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985):129-30.

phenomenon called *Ayya Vazhi* emerged and constituted itself around a mystic who came to be addressed as Vaikuntar (1809-1851).¹¹

The religious text of *Ayya Vazhi*, *Akilathirattu* by name, which articulates its core mystical religious experience, narrates a sequence of events. It begins with the narration of the mythical aeons when Mayon (Vishnu) took different forms to annihilate evil, goes into the incarnation of Mayon as Vaikuntar along with his mission of establishing *Dharmayukam* (age of righteousness) in the place of *Kaliyukam* (age of evil), and ends with the final victory of Vaikuntar. This narration has a main plot, articulated through many sub-plots. While these main and sub-plots clearly distinguish *Ayya Vazhi* from other religious traditions, they have clear parallels with the Vaishnavite tradition, the Christian tradition and the folk traditions. I would like to explore a few of those aspects which have parallels with Christianity, which can be read as Christian resonances.

Parallels between Vaikuntar and Jesus

1. Vaikuntar is portrayed as the ‘son of God’,¹² which certainly has parallel with Jesus as the Son of God. This is an unusual portrayal as far as an Indian deity is concerned. *Akilathirattu*, the holy book of *Ayya Vazhi*, even uses the word ‘*karthan*’¹³ for Vaikuntar. Vaikuntar addresses Mayon as “Father”. J.N. Farquhar points out that one of the impacts, born out of the influence of Christianity upon modern religious movements in India, was to call God as Father.¹⁴ It is interesting to find it in this subaltern religious phenomenon too.

2. Vaikuntar announces a manifesto at the start of his public ministry.¹⁵ This is in parallel with Jesus’ announcement of a manifesto at the start of his ministry.

¹¹ For an elaborate study of *Ayya Vazhi*, cf. G. Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency – A Case Study of Ayya Vazhi, A Subaltern Religious Phenomenon in South Travancore* (Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2003)

¹² *Akilathirattu*, 194, 207, 208.

¹³ *Akilathirattu*, 338.

¹⁴ Cf. J. N. Farquhar, *Modern Religious Movements in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1998 [1915]), 436.

¹⁵ *Akilathirattu*, 264-265.

3. The central project of the birth of Vaikuntar as the 'son of Mayon' is to establish a Dharmayukam (age of Righteousness).¹⁶ This has clear parallel to Jesus' project of establishing the Reign of God.

4. Vaikuntar identifies himself with the oppressed people; the ruling class is intrigued by this; and plots to imprison him. This has parallel with the opposition Jesus experienced from the ruling elites of Palestine.

5. Finally, Akilathirattu announces the 'victory' of Vaikuntar, who after his death, is 'seated at the throne with Mayon', and transposes the establishment of Dharmayukam to an eschatological time, when he will rule as the King, and this gives hope to the followers of *Ayya Vazhi*. This certainly has parallel with Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God, obtaining an eschatological meaning, which continues to inspire the Christians.

6. Other notable similarities in *Ayya Vazhi* are: 'absence of idols in temples for worship', addressing the followers of *Ayya Vazhi* as 'people of God', 'emergence of congregational worship', 'a religious-ethical vision centred on love', etc.

Thus, *Ayya Vazhi* carries many resonances of Christianity. The most important one among them is the very plot of the salvific narrative of *Ayya Vazhi* (birth of Vaikuntar – his mission of establishing the age of righteousness – trials – final victory in terms of eschatological realisation). This case-study helps us to take note of some resonances of Christianity in *Ayya Vazhi*. A very important aspect that went into the making of this resonance was its 'non-intentional' character: an inspiration going beyond the intention of Christianity and serving as an enduring element to resource the articulation of a mystic experience!

By Way of Concluding...

This paper is an invitation to take a new look at the understanding of 'indigenous' in relation to Christianity. Along with full-fledged visible forms of Christianity, which are distinct and bordered, elements / resonances, which get integrated with other religious traditions can be understood as latent forms of indigenous Christianity. There can always

¹⁶ *Akilathirattu*, 4, 207, 212

be questions as to whether they are effective, substantive, shaped with form and content, to be called as Christianities. But, we cannot deny the fact that the formless resonances have had enduring presence and these subterraneous latent interactions are as effective as leaven in the dough. The best examples in the life of Christianity, on the opposite direction, i.e. Christianity carrying enduring resonances of other traditions, are the Judaistic faith and the Greek philosophy which remain within Christianity as enduring resonances. This is an invitation to break the shell of bounded essentialism in religion. The Spirit blows where it wills, and God has God's own ways of nourishing God's creation with faith!

Department of Christian Studies
 University of Madras
 Chepauk, Chennai
gnanapat@gmail.com

The Political Ambivalence of Indigenous Christianities: Analysis and Reflections on the Post-Denominational Age

Felix Wilfred

This article, after sketching a typology of the various indigenous Christianities, examines whether and to what extent these Churches are politically involved. Many empirical studies seem to indicate that there is no consistent pattern in their political engagement which is dictated by the immediate circumstances and contexts. If most of these Churches have often been conformists attuned to political powers and the elites, have at other times played a challenging role of resistance and opposition. Today, the indigenous Churches in several instances wield so much public influence that they have pushed to the political margins the mainline Churches which played a dominant role in the past. As for future, the way the indigenous Churches live and express Christian faith and interact at the grassroots level with people in their everyday life seems to have significant potential for democratization of societies from below.

When applied to Christianity the word "indigenous" is used in a number of different but related senses. For many today, a study of indigenous Christianities would mean, from an institutional perspective, the issue of inculturation, syncretism, etc. Unfortunately, this perspective has dominated the study of indigenous Christianities to the neglect of

other important questions and aspects that lie behind their origin, and in their interaction with the socio-cultural environment.

At the other extreme is the reference to forms of Christianity or Churches which are initiated by the local people, and therefore originating in the local soil. Thus we have a number of Churches initiated by Africans, by Koreans, Japanese, and Indians etc. Each one of these indigenous Christianities has specific social, cultural, historical, spiritual and circumstantial factors for its emergence.

From the perspective of freedom and autonomy, indigenous Churches are the ones that are not dependent on instances of authority outside their country or region. Such indigenous Churches define themselves as self-governing, self-propagating and self-determining. On the other hand, many mainline Churches have been so dependent on outside centres of authority for their direction that they showed themselves to be “phlegmatic Churches” rather than politically active ones. The nature and contours of this type of indigenous Churches are difficult to characterize as they are intertwined with nationalism and state-intervention, as is the case with contemporary Chinese “indigenous” Christianity.

Does the fact of their local origin make the indigenous Christianities¹ politically more active? Historically, could the indigenous Churches claim to have been a force of resistance against political powers and principalities, or were they acquiescing to the dominant political order? Where do the indigenous Churches stand in this respect vis-à-vis mainline Churches? Could the indigenous Churches be viewed as contributors to the process of democratization? In this article we shall go into such questions. Our reflections are set in two parts. The first part will explore the background of the emergence of indigenous Christianities and try to classify them according to different points of reference. This background is indispensable for understanding them in their political role. Against this background and typology, in the second

¹ In this article, I use interchangeably the expressions “indigenous Christianities”, “indigenous Churches” and “independent Churches”.

part, we will go into a critical reflection on their political engagement or the absence of it. This will lead to a more complex and nuanced understanding of indigenous Christianities.

Part I

The Background for a Political Understanding of Indigenous Christianities

The Socio-Political Origins

There are two rather simplistic and prejudiced approaches to indigenous Christianities. One is a theological interpretation of them by the mainline Churches as being a marginal, separatist and sectarian phenomenon. They are seen as a threat to the historical or mainline Churches. The second approach is more sociological which uses the “conspiracy theory”. Since many of the independent Churches are Evangelical and Pentecostal in their inspiration, they are viewed as implanted by the American imperial military establishment to counter the movement and theology of liberation. All this fails to get into the complex reality and the diversity independent Churches represent.

Unlike the mainline Churches, indigenous Christianities offer a lot of scope for choice and space for voluntarism. That is keeping with the spirit of contemporary times. The focus on experience and the direct communication with the Spirit, freed from the mediatory structures of authority in the traditional Christianity, prove to be attractive; so too the integration of the spiritual and the material wellbeing touching upon everyday life. Furthermore, the independent Church movement, as Daniel Bays observes with regard to China, “marked a crucial stage in the maturity of the Chinese Church”.²

Emic Approach to the Study of Indigenous Christianities

To be able to get closer to an understanding of the indigenous Churches, and especially their political involvement, we need to follow

² Daniel H. Bays, ed., “The Growth of Independent Christianity in china, 1900 – 1937”, in ID. ed., *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (California: Stanford University Press, 1996): 316.

an *emic* approach. It is a fact that many of the studies done by the so-called mainline Churches about indigenous Christianities are highly prejudiced. These indigenous forms are judged against certain parameters that are alien to them. There are others who contrast the mainline Christianity as “great tradition” over against the “little tradition” indigenous Churches represent.³ I think this categorization too does not take into account the unique nature of these Churches which foreshadow a new stage in the history of Christianity, not to speak of their highly remarkable growth in the South – Latin America, Africa, Asia, etc.⁴ Characterizing them as “little tradition” is tantamount to consider them as marginal. The indigenous study of Christianities require an *emic* approach which implies the need to enter into their world of experience. This is an important component in any phenomenological approach to the study of religion, unlike an *etic* approach which treats religious phenomena simply as objects of scientific observation and analysis. *Emic* approach calls for a methodological conversion (different from confessional conversion) to the world of experience and belief of indigenous Christianities, to be able to understand them as they would like to be understood.

Typology of Indigenous Christianities

It may be too ambitious to propose a typology for indigenous Christianities. Even at the risk of some generalization and certain overlap, let me propose a few models within the indigenous Christianities as a heuristic means for their understanding.

³ This is the perspective from which Roger E. Hedlund views them. See Roger E. Hedlund, “Indian Instituted Churches: Indigenous Christianity Indian Style”, in *Mission Studies*, vol. XVI-1, 31 (1999), 26-42; ID., *Quest for Identity: India's Churches of Indigenous Origin*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000): 1,3,10; ID., “Indian Expressions of Indigenous Christianity”, in *Studies in World Christianity*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2004), 185-204.

⁴ See Aparecida Vilaça and Robin M. Wright, eds., *Native Christians: Modes and Effects of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2009); Deji Ayegboyin, S. Ademola Ishola, *African Indigenous Churches: An Historical Perspective* (Indiana: Greater Heights Publications, 1997) ; Philippe Denis, “African Indigenous Christianity in a Geo-historical perspective”, in *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, vol.38, no. (2012).

1. Resistance and Identity Based

The opposition by the local people to the ways of missionaries and their association with the ruling colonial powers led to the emergence of indigenous Churches. While several independent Churches came into being as break-away groups from the missionary movement, other Churches sprouted on their own. Protesting against the haughty treatment of the local people by the missionaries and against some of their policies and practices, certain individuals started their own Churches.⁵ “Independent Churches” is an apt expression, since the local Christians freed themselves from the control of the missionaries. For example, we have the case of the “Nattu Sabai” (The Hindu Church of Lord Jesus) in Tamilnadu,⁶ and the case of the International Assembly of the True Jesus Church (TJC) founded Paul Wei in 1917 in Beijing, China.

Chinese Christians exhibited a strong desire for independence after the outburst of the Boxer incidents in 1900. Chinese Christians had long been accused of believing in a foreign religion (*yang jiao*). They were criticized for being protected by Western missionaries and foreigners ... Chinese Christians, including Cheng and others, were seeking a new identity for themselves. They wanted to demonstrate their independence, fostering a self-reliant Christianity that was freed from foreign funding, from foreign mission direction, and from foreign preaching and theology - that is, the Churches should be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.⁷

⁵ For example in Japan, Uchimura Kanzo started in 1901 a Non-Church Movement called *Mukyokai*. In the Philippines around 1915 Felix Manalao began the *Iglesia ni Cristo*. For a good overview of indigenous Christianities in Asia, see Paul Joshua Bhakiaraj, “Forms of Asian Indigenous Christianities”, in Felix Wilfred, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80-97; see also Allan H. Anderson, “Pentecostal Movements in East Asia: Indigenous Oriental Christianity?”, in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, 87.3, (1999), 319-340.

⁶ See the contribution of Arthur Jeyakumar in this number of Jeevadhara. We have also the case of *Bible Mission* started by Bro. M. Devadoss (1875-1960) in 1938 in an attempt to form an indigenous Church.

⁷ Cf. Peter Tze Ming Ng, “Cheng Jingyi: Prophet of His Time” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 36, no. 1, p. 14; see also Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010)

Many independent Churches in South Africa and in West Africa too sprang up as people struggled to free themselves from the authority and leadership of Western missionaries. It led to new forms of Christianity socially vibrating with the African ethos and psychologically satisfying. In other cases, indigenous Churches came to be formed out of conflict and struggle within Christian communities themselves in terms of caste, power-sharing, leadership etc.⁸ Creation of indigenous Churches was also an identity-marker for discriminated against groups on account of their caste or class. The formation of indigenous Churches in India, from the larger socio-political perspective, could be viewed as an expression of the subaltern movement within Christianity. As for China, it is interesting to note that the indigenous Church movement was occasioned not only by disillusionment with missionary movement, but also due to the suppression of Christianity and religion in general during the period of cultural revolution. The socio-political circumstances have led to the formation of many house-Churches of indigenous origin which are, by and large, conservative and evangelical in orientation and are proselytizing.

2. *Messianic and Apocalyptically-Oriented*

The indigenous Churches came into existence also because the type of Christianity brought through the missionary movement, could not answer the deeper aspirations of large masses of people marginalized and suffering social, economic and political oppression and disabilities. This was particularly the case in times of crisis – political, social, economic and environmental. When there seemed no humanly possible way out of their plight, they easily turned towards messianic, millenarian and apocalyptic movements which caught their imagination for a different order of things to come and inspired exultant hope for survival in the midst of their suffering and marginality.⁹ These movements led

⁸ Today, there are new forms of conflicts within these independent Churches. For a case study of Christ Apostolic Church and Cherubim and Seraphim Church of Nigeria, see Alokun Olusegun Ayodeji Peter, Alabi David Oladunjoye et al., "Critical Analysis of Church Politics and Crises within the Indigenous Christianities in Nigeria" in *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2011), 360 – 370.

⁹ This is a point which Waldo Cesar and Richard Shaull make in explaining the phenomenal growth of Pentecostalism in Brazil. See their work: *Pentecostalism and*

to a transformation and re-ordering of or their lives – individual and collective. Millenarian as most of these Churches are, they expected the sudden appearance of the glorious Lord who will vanquish evil and triumph over the enemy against whom now one has to enter into a spiritual warfare.¹⁰ Apocalyptic streak in these indigenous Christian movements gave its members an insight into things which are hidden to the eyes of the world, but will be revealed at the end of time.¹¹ Many of the indigenous Christian Churches and movements had charismatic founders.

3. Spirit-Centered

Most indigenous Churches are strongly Spirit-centered. From a theological point of view, they present a challenge to the Christomonism of most mainline Churches. The Spirit-based Pentecostal indigenous Churches are to be found everywhere, and each of them has got its own specific socio-cultural context of emergence. Unfortunately, much of the historiography of indigenous Churches of Pentecostal origin are presented as if they were derivatives from the American Azusa Street renewal movement at the early beginnings of the twentieth century. This contradicts facts.¹² For example, nineteenth century India witnessed Spirit-oriented forms of indigenous Christianity. Pandita Ramabai has been an important figure in the movement. As Allan Anderson notes, one of the earliest Pentecostal movements in Asia

the Future of the Christian Churches: Promises, Limitations, Challenges, Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, 2000. As for the development of millennial and apocalyptic type of indigenous Churches in China in 20th century, see Lian Xi, op.cit.

¹⁰ The messianic and apocalyptic language and rhetoric have not remained only within the Churches, but have been employed also for political purposes, as was the case with W. Bush Sr in connection with the Gulf War.

¹¹ There seems to be today a return in the Churches to Apocalypticism. See *Concilium* 2014/3. The entire issue deals with the *Return of Apocalypticism*. See also George E. Ladd, "Revival of Apocalyptic in the Churches", in *Review & Expositor* 72 (1975), 263-270; Margaret Mollett, "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture in South Africa: An Overview and Update", in *Religion & Theology* 19 (2012), 219–236

¹² Cf. Allan Anderson, "Pentecostalism and Charismatic Movements in Asia" in Felix Wilfred, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 158-170.

was that associated with the 1905-1907 revival that occurred at a girls' home in Pandita Ramabai's mission in Mukti, India, in which girls baptised by the Spirit had seen visions, fallen into trances and spoken in tongues. Ramabai understood this revival as the means by which the Holy Spirit was creating an indigenous form of Indian Christianity. Notably, the Mukti revival seems to have preceded and to have been unrelated to the Azusa Street revival.¹³

4. *Indigenous-Religion Based*

Many indigenous Churches bear traits of the traditional religions of the people in a particular region. A classical example is the independent Churches in Africa which have integrated several elements from the traditional religions into Biblical Christianity.¹⁴ Christianity is re-shaped through the religious universe they have inherited. We could cite here the example of the Church of the Ancestors of Malawi or the Nigerian Reformed Ogboni Fraternity. These Churches incorporate in themselves the traditional African religious ethos such as healing practices, exorcism, and spontaneity in worship with chanting, drumming and dancing. Something similar could be observed in the Korean indigenous Churches in which people have integrated the shamanistic tradition with its belief in the world of spirits – ancestors, divine spirits inhabiting in nature, in trees, rivers, mountains etc. Far from signifying a break from tradition, Christianity came to be re-expressed in Korean indigenous Churches as extension of the shamanistic tradition, which also explains why these Churches have captured the imagination of large masses of people among the Koreans.¹⁵

¹³ Allan Anderson, "Pentecostal Movements in East Asia: Indigenous Oriental Christianity?", *Swedish Missiological Themes* 87, 3 (1999), 320.

¹⁴ Ronald J. Allen, "Creating an Indigenous African Church", in *The Christian Century*, March 6, (1991), 265-269.

¹⁵ See Boo Woong Yoo, "Response To Korean Shamanism By The Pentecostal Church", in *International Review of Mission*, vol. 75, no. 297 (1986), 70-74; Similar seems to be also the case in Taiwan. See John d. Dadosky, "Shamanism and Christianity: Religious Encounters among Indigenous Peoples of East Asia", in Olivier Lardinois and Benoit Vermander, eds., *Variétés Sinologiques* n. s. 96 (Taipei, Taiwan: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2008)

5. *State-Engineered*

Religion could play, as history and experience show, a destabilizing role vis-a-vis established political powers. Hence, any authoritarian state will tend to control religion and its public expressions, especially if it goes in the direction of opposition and resistance. The state employs many strategies to counter the power of religion, and one of them is to split the religious group, or support and maintain new splinter religious groups. This dynamic has been at work also in the formation of certain state-sponsored indigenous Churches. The state justifies these Churches on the plea that they are patriotic whereas other Churches imported from the West are anti-national. This type of state-engineered Churches could be seen, for example, in authoritarian and centralized states like China, Vietnam, Myanmar and so on. Typical is the case of China, where the state sponsors the so-called Three Self-Patriotic Movement (TSPM), namely self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating; it also promotes and controls the so-called Patriotic Church through its State Religious Affairs Bureau.¹⁶ In India, though we do not have such type of state-engineered Churches, the idea of a Church that is ideologically oriented to Hindutva can be seen in what is called "*Swadeshi Church*". This has been mooted by the right wing Hindutva forces.

Part II

The Political Ambivalence

A common feature that can be observed in the history of Christianity in the South is that its theology and praxis were politically divided, with a section of Christians supporting the colonial powers, whereas another section resisting the foreign powers and supporting the indigenous resistance and liberation movements. This is true of the events in Asia

¹⁶ See Eric O. Hanson, *Catholic Politics in China and Korea* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1980); Philip L. Wickeri, *Seeking the Common Ground* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998). As a matter of fact, the three self movement do not originate from the state, but from the local Christian community which used these goals in a bid to assert its agency and to free itself from the control of Western missionaries and mission societies.

as much as in Africa. However, the situation after political independence from colonial powers has been so very diverse, and it is difficult to identify any common pattern. Our purpose here is not to go into the political engagement of the so-called mainline Churches, but that of the independent Churches and communities.

Increasing Political Influence

There is not only a phenomenal increase in the growth of indigenous Churches, but also in their political influence. To cite an example, in Kenya the indigenous Churches of Afro-Pentecostal inspiration, during the entire period of president Moi (1979 – 2002), simply fell in line with the government and supported it.¹⁷ Justification came from the words of St Paul: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God” (Rom 13:1). Indigenous Church leaders were favoured with a lot of gifts by the state, in return for their “prayers”! In the last few years, however, the situation has changed in a new direction. I do not mean, that they started opposing the state; rather the development is more in the line of active involvement in politics and attempt to wield political power by the indigenous Churches, elbowing out the influence the historical or mainline Churches wielded in public life. It is an irony that these mainline Churches once in the forefront in the struggle against dictatorship and one-political party system find themselves today marginalized as the political influence of indigenous Christianities has been growing matched only by their

¹⁷ For a case studies in Africa, see Collis Garikai Machoko, “African Initiated Churches and Party Politics: Zimbabwean Experience”, in *The International Journal of African Catholicism*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Ontario, Canada: Huntington University Sudbury, 2013), 1-40; Alokun Olusegun Ayodeji Peter, Alabi David Oladunjoye, et al, “Critical Analyses of Church Politics and Crises within the Indigenous Christianity in Nigeria”, in *American Journal of Social and Management Sciences*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2011), 360-370; Julius M. Gathogo, “Afro-Pentecostalism and the Kenyan Political Landscape”, in *Swedish Missiological Themes*, vol.101, no. 2 (2013), 203-230. See also H. W. Turner, “The Place of Independent Religious Movements in the Modernization of Africa”, in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 2, no.1(1969), 43-63; Linda E. Thomas, “Survival and Resistance in an African Indigenous Church”, in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 98 (1997), 13-20.

numerical growth. The situation seems to be similar in Korea with its mega indigenous Churches of Pentecostal inspiration.

No religion functions in the abstract. Every religion is socially, culturally situated and is developed and practiced in a particular political environment. This is true of Christianity as well. But the other-worldly interpretation of Christianity has often led to a-historical approach to its life, beliefs and practices. Nowhere we see better the historical, social, cultural and political nature of Christianity (the geo-historical factor) as in the indigenous Churches. The indigenous Churches do not stand on a de-historicized high pedestal. Rather the history of Christianity in a particular place becomes one with the history of the people or the group. Reversely, the indigenous Churches serve as a window to the understanding of the life and concerns of a particular people. In indigenous Christianities we are in a new paradigm. For a long time, Christianity in the South was associated with initiatives from the West and its mission enterprise. Another paradigm came into existence when Christianity was viewed as having no one centre, but being polycentric in nature. The phenomenon of indigenous Churches belongs to a third paradigm in which shaping of Christian life and practices are seen from the perspective of the *agency* of the peoples themselves and their encounter with and interpretation of Christian life and experience.¹⁸

From Quietism to Political Activism – A Theological Shift

The political role any Church plays depends very much on the kind of theology it subscribes to, especially its vision of the world and societal realities. As for political involvement, the general picture of the indigenous Churches inspired by evangelical and Pentecostal spirit, is one of rejection and denial of the world, or at least separation from the “world” (understood in a negative sense) and its affairs, including politics. With their eyes fixed on heavenly matters, these Churches were least interested in the mundane political engagement. The most

¹⁸ Cf. Charles E. Farhadian, *Introducing World Christianity* (Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012). See Felix Wilfred, “From World Mission to Global Christianities” in *Concilium* 2011/1, 13-26.

they were concerned about public matters was when it was a question of their freedom to express and live their Christianity different from the mainline Christian traditions. The situation has changed in all continents. In Latin America since 1990s certain new developments have taken these Churches to greater political commitment. One of the factors is simply the numerical strength. With its astounding growth, the indigenous Churches have become a political force to reckon with. Secondly, the theological shift towards earthly wellbeing ("prosperity Gospel") in these Christianities called for greater involvement in economic and political fields.

Ad Hoc Political Involvement

The ambivalence we find in indigenous Christianities is due also to the fact that their political involvement is most often ad hoc. There is no cogency in their political direction and action. For any such consistency it would require that the indigenous Christianities consciously treat the political realm as a field of sacred duty; should be able to draw resources from Bible and other resources; and finally should be able to motivate and mobilize the Christian believers for political involvement. Since none of this is taking place in a consistent manner, it could be only expected that the responses to political situation of the indigenous Christianities will be characterized by unpredictability and even volatility.

Political Co-optation?

Given their volatility, the indigenous Churches could easily be politically co-opted. A specific case in point is the indigenous Churches in South Africa. They have a distinct origin in the experience of discrimination and racism. In a country and society divided along racist lines, the black people could not feel at home in Churches of white people imported from the West. The indigenous Churches were clearly an identity marker for the black-people. The black people felt at home in Churches which reflected their tradition and cultural ethos.¹⁹

¹⁹ At this point, I cannot but make a reference to the plight of the Dalit people. They do not feel at home in caste-dominated Church-communities and congregations. Should the

On the other hand, some of these indigenous Churches allowed themselves to be co-opted by the state and its ideology. Thus, for example, in Zimbabwe, Johane Marange Apostolic Church (JMAC), and African Apostolic Church (AAC) attuned themselves to the authoritarian and nationalist political party and ideology for whose successful election these Churches proved to be indispensable. I referred earlier to state-engineered type of indigenous Churches. It is clear that these Churches get co-opted by the state in return for certain limited freedom to continue their activities, and in some cases to get privileges.

But the question that needs to be raised is whether the indigenous Churches co-opted today will continue so also in future? Could we project a different scenario? To respond, let us take the case of China where Christianity is spreading quite fast and there is increasingly positive reception of it among the people.²⁰ Though many of the indigenous Churches are evangelical and Pentecostal in their orientation, the aggravation of socio-political situation in that country and suppression of religious freedom and democracy may lead to a situation in which these indigenous Churches may become a significant political force (as it happened ago decades ago with the Churches in Eastern Europe) and rallying point for a different political order.²¹ In other words, though these Churches may appear compliant to the state, they could turn out to be a new political force of change and transformation. They may contribute to a democratization process in the long run. This could be surmised from the influence these indigenous Churches and communities wield at micro-level where they as leaven are already contributing to the transformation of local situations. Similar developments could happen in Vietnam, Myanmar and countries in

Dalit people struggle within these communities for dignity, equality and participation, or should they form Dalit Indigenous or Independent Churches where they would feel at home and through these Dalit Independent Churches contribute to reform the entire Church. This is a dilemma the Dalit Christian community is facing today.

²⁰ Cf. David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003)

²¹ Cf. David H. Lumsdaine, ed. *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Africa where indigenous Churches seem to take now a conformist position.

The Political Moorings of Prosperity Gospel

Generally, the so-called prosperity gospel is viewed by critics as an example of religion being used for economic gains. The high percentage of tithes to Churches, for example, was supposed to bring abundance of God's blessings and prosperity. What is not sufficiently analyzed and studied is the fact that prosperity gospel did not develop in a political vacuum. In some critical instances like that of South Africa under apartheid, while many of the mainline Churches challenged the state theology and its justification of racial segregation and discrimination, and were ready to accept the consequences of this resistance, several of the evangelical-Pentecostal Churches adopted an a-political posture, and even openly supported the apartheid regime.²² This pattern of a-political posture or support to the political powers could be identified in many other cases of evangelical-Pentecostal and indigenous Churches. This mode of behavior by the indigenous Churches naturally attracted rewards and privileges from the state.²³

The political patronage created an atmosphere for the propagation of a "Prosperity Gospel" by these Churches. The theology of the prosperity gospel, instead of focusing on life after death, focuses on life before death on this earth, and promotes a life of wellbeing and material prosperity and abundance as the promise of God for his people. This attitude could be taken as faith-inspired world-affirmation, overcoming a world negation and alienation. So far so good. But then the prosperity gospel considers the lack of prosperity and riches as

²² Cf. Anthony Egan, "South Africa's Prosperity Gospel Churches", in *Concilium* 2014/4, 55-64.

²³ In the case of South Africa, whereas during the anti-apartheid struggles, the mainline Churches by and large supported the African National Congress (ANC) and its political programme, subsequent to abolition of apartheid and democratization, the same Churches turned against ANC and its ruling elite in the new dispensation, and critiqued the rampant corruption that has overtaken the country. As a result, ANC turned for its support to evangelical-Pentecostal and indigenous Churches. In the atmosphere of state-patronage, prosperity gospel started thriving.

resulting from lack of faith. In other words, increase in wealth, possession, worldly happiness, blessing, and prosperity is viewed as a sign of increase in faith. Even though, as empirical studies seem to show, there need not necessarily be a link between religion and corruption,²⁴ however, lacking in critique and ethical concerns, the preaching of prosperity gospel and the theology behind it could easily ignore or cover up the corruption through which the political elites are amassing wealth and prospering. Moreover, the prosperity Gospel, instead of a faith-based critique, seems to support capitalism, market and consumerism. Though some of the indigenous Churches still are anchored in prosperity gospel, more recent trends show a different direction. As Anthony Egan remarks with reference to South Africa,

The global Pentecostal movement has backed away strongly from anything that appears to be driven by the 'Prosperity Gospel'. The 2011 Cape Town Commitment is explicitly opposed to it, calls for a firm commitment to ethical stewardship of resources and condemns what it terms 'the toxic idolatry of consumerism'.²⁵

Conclusion

The so-called mainline Churches dominated the ecumenical scene and discourse for a long time. In the ecumenical movement, indigenous and independent Churches were viewed as marginal phenomena. They were looked down as "sectarian". The recent decades have witnessed a revolutionary reversal of this order. The mainline Churches all over the world – Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox – seem to be declining in the Christian demography whereas the indigenous Christianities of evangelical and Pentecostal inspiration have gained great momentum in terms of their numerical growth and their impact at the micro and macro levels. In their growth process we could identify different political stands – apathy to politics, conformism to the existing political order and resistance to the powers that be. It is difficult to discover any

²⁴ This is an important point Anthony Egan makes. See *art.cit.*

²⁵ Anthony Egan, *art. cit* p. 60.

consistent pattern. There is a kind of ad hoc response. Their political role has been changing also according to different conditions and circumstances, which we characterized as politically ambiguous.

More recent trends in the indigenous Christianities, however, show that they are becoming politically more assertive especially at the grassroots level with increasing influence in the lives of individuals and small communities. If not explicitly, but implicitly through their local involvement and manner of acting, they exhibit a noteworthy potential for the democratization of societies. It is possible that in the course of time, they may even become a critical force to challenge the powers that be. And this could be the case especially in countries with authoritarian and centralized forms of governance. In regions and countries where there is already democratic institutions and rule of law, they could turn out to be a contributor to strengthen the process of democratization. Their contribution in this line could be all the more significant since they seem to provide the necessary skills and practice for a democracy of the ordinary people and of everyday life, rather than a democracy of the elites.

Study of indigenous Christianities, including their political role, helps us develop an anthropology of Christianity, namely how it has been encountered, appropriated and moulded by the indigenous people in a variety of ways according to their cultural genius and inherited religious traditions, social and political challenges. Moreover, indigenous forms of Christianity have helped to de-absolutize the Christian tradition and fashion new ways of living and expressing the Christian experience and message. In fact, this reinvention of Christianity by indigenous traditions, freed from the accusation of being foreign, could make it vibrant in the South and play a more efficacious and convincing political role.²⁶ Having said that we need to be aware of the fact that their

²⁶ I think the study of indigenous Christianity would represent a new phase in its understanding. As is well-known the history of mission was written from the perspective of Western mission enterprises. A corrective to this came when the socio-political and cultural aspects were investigated as a necessary background to the understanding of Christianity in the South. Today, I think we are in a new phase,

political involvement past and present indicate unpredictability, volatility and ambivalence. The same could also characterize the future in spite of their great potential and general appeal.

Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies

Chennai

felixwilfred@gmail.com

and this is characterized by a deeper study of the Church movements and indigenous Christianities that came from the peoples themselves. A deeper study of this, especially in relation to its political role in the past and present will yield a lot of new insights. This remains a task for the scholars of Christian Studies.

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